

On the Syrian Democratic and Revolutionary Opposition

Tuesday 1 December 2015, by [AFARY Frieda](#), [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2015).

Zamaneh Editor's Note: Joseph Daher is a Syrian-Swiss Marxist intellectual with a PhD in Development at the University of SOAS, London. He is also a member of Solidarités in Switzerland and of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria. What do leftist Syrian intellectuals think about the current crisis, Assad's future, the intervention of world powers, the activism of forces representing alternatives and the role and influence of Syrian Kurds? The text below contains Daher's responses to two questions that have been posed in order to better comprehend the events in Syria from an alternative point of view.

Frieda Afary - What is your analysis of the Russian government's airstrikes in Syria since September 30?

Joseph Daher - The objectives of these airstrikes are clear: save and consolidate the political and military power of the Assad regime. In other words crush all forms of opposition-whether democratic or reactionary- to the Assad regime under the so called "war on terror". Most targets are civilians and factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) still existing. About 100,000 civilians have been forced to flee their regions because of Russian bombings. Russian bombings also destroyed dozens of hospitals while doctors and patients were killed in these raids. In areas such as the outskirts of Aleppo, the bombings in some cases even benefited the IS, thanks to a lightning breakthrough against factions of the FSA disoriented by Russian strike. Moreover Russian strikes are operated with the direct collaboration of the US and Israel.

Authoritarian regimes use this same kind of war on terror propaganda to repress popular movements and/or groups opposed to them: Assad's regimes has been against the popular movement since day 1 of the popular uprising; Sissi in Egypt repressed particularly the Muslim Brotherhoods, but also progressive left and democratic movements such as the Revolutionary Socialists, Movement of April 6, etc. ; Erdogan has been against the PKK and various leftist movements. Moreover Russian strikes are operated with the direct collaboration of the US and Israel.

Which figures and what organizations represent the democratic or revolutionary Syrian opposition?

The left wing organizations, movements and individuals that participated in the revolution have been greatly repressed by the Assad regime firstly and later by fundamentalist forces. A number of democratic and progressive activists who were at the beginning of the revolution live today in exile because of the terrible repression. For example various Syrian progressive organisations and individuals gathered in Turkey in July 2015 and issued this statement "Istanbul Declaration: Break

the siege on the Syrian revolution! With the people of Syria: down with Bashar, Daesh and the imperialist interventions!"[1]. Signatories included activists such as Salameh Kaileh, Palestinian-Syrian Marxist, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Syrian writer who spent more than ten years in prison because he was part of a leftist organisation, Yasser Munif, Syrian activist- Co-founder of the Global Campaign of Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution, Mansour Atassi, Leftist Democracy Party (Syria), or groups such as Revolutionary Left Current in Syria[2] that notably includes long-time political activist Ghayath Naisse.

You can also find other feminist activists such as Samar Yazbeck, currently living in Paris and heading an organization called "Women Now for Development" or Nahed Badawiya, who has spent years in prison prior to the revolution and is also currently living in exile in Paris after having participated in the uprising.

Nevertheless, many individuals and small groups, although very much weakened, exist in some areas among local coordination popular groups. Pockets of hope and resistance still exist in Syria and are composed of various democratic and progressive groups and movements opposing all sides of the counter-revolution, the Assad regime and Islamic fundamentalist groups. They are the ones still maintaining the dreams of the beginning of the revolution and its objectives: democracy, social justice, equality and no to sectarianism. They can be found in Aleppo, Rural Aleppo, Idlib and Rural Idlib, in Rural Damascus, etc... You can find many examples on my blog Syria Freedom Forever of popular resistance.[3]

The revolutionaries in these areas organise through popular councils at the levels of villages, neighbourhoods and regions. The popular councils have actually been the true spearheads of the movement that mobilized the people for the protests and organisation of daily life in areas where the regime disappeared. The regions liberated from the regime developed forms of self-organisation based on the organization of the masses. Youth and other form of coalitions also exist in Syria with varying types of activities.

Last Summer, protests were organised in the rural areas around Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere like in the city of Idlib. In the small town of Al-Atarib in rural Aleppo, held by the Al Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra there have been several demonstrations against its authoritarian practices. Thousands of people marched in the town of Saqba, in rural Damascus, for the aims of the Syrian revolution on 7 August 2015. A week later a group of women there protested for release of political prisoners held by the Army of Islam organization. They have been protesting for the past few months. Dozens held a sit-in at the office of the local council of Douma near Damascus in July after a councilperson was abducted.[4] In the end of June, A demonstration was organized in the city of Idlib after the Friday prayer and demanded that the city's administration hand over to the people, the private military headquarters of Jaysh al-Fatah led by Jabhat al-Nusra outside the city.[5]

On November 10, 2015, civil disobedience actions were organised by activists protesting against the kidnappings of revolutionaries by Jabhat Al-Nusra in the neighborhoods of Aleppo. On October 18, 2015, a campaign of solidarity of revolutionaries in Douma was organised with the Palestinian People and the Intifada. In October 6, 2015, a demonstration was organised by the revolutionaries in Aleppo against Jabhat Al-Nusra and demanded that it exit Aleppo. In September 25, 2015, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians & Turkmen marched against IS and Assad crimes in the neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo.

Last Summer (2015) in the province of Suwayda, mostly inhabited by the Druze community, various popular protests were organized against the regime's policies and lack of services. Demonstrations and protests continued following the assassination of Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous, who is a Druze Sheikh who defended them. Bal'ous who was known for his opposition to the Syrian regime and to the

Islamic fundamentalist forces. Demonstrators protested in front of several regime buildings and smashed a statue of the former Syrian regime dictator Hafez al-Assad. Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous was a very popular figure among the Druze population and was leading a group called "Sheikhs of dignity", which was committed to protecting the Druze in the province and was also fighting the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous was also opposed to the Syrian army's recruiting of men originating from Suwayda, to be sent to fight outside the province.

Regarding the three cantons of Rojava, many interesting things are occurring on many aspects (women's rights, minority participation, secular institutions, etc...), especially in a war situation. These experiences of autonomy are moreover positive for a Kurdish nation oppressed for decades, especially as I support the self determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, some contradictions exist in Rojava, which do not represent an example of self-organization from below of the popular masses, but are rather processes controlled from above. First, we must address the authoritarian practices of Syrian branch of PKK (PYD), both in their internal organizational functioning and against other citizens and political actors. The authoritarianism of the PYD was demonstrated in its repression and imprisonment of activists and the closure of organizations or institutions critical of them such as the independent radio Arta in February 2014.

Although Kurdish youth participated in large numbers in the Syrian uprising since 2011, the PKK has sought a middle path between the regime and its opposition since the beginning of the Syrian revolutionary process in 2011. The PKK actually currently coexist in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah with the forces of the Syrian regime and is not trying to get rid of them. Some relations still exist with the regime's armed forces, but also with some groups of the Free Syrian army. PYD leader, Saleh Muslim, has also welcomed Russian military intervention in Syria in October 2015.

Of course we should denounce the various sections of the Syrian opposition that still deny the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people. The National Coalition for the Syrian Revolution and opposition forces, supported by the Western states, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies, had an ambiguous attitude during the attacks of the reactionary Islamic forces, including Jabhat al Nusra in the Kurdish regions in the past. These positions are all the more reprehensible, considering the decades of political, social and cultural oppression of the Kurdish people in Syria and policies of colonization or Arabisation implemented by the Assad regime in the northern regions of Syria. The northern regions of Syria were also the poorest and the least provided with social services. This is not to mention the silence of a large part of the opposition during the Kurdish intifada in Syria in 2004. Some even accused it of serving foreign "imperialist" projects in order to weaken Syria.

The PKK and the PYD have generally adopted a passive attitude toward popular protest movement in the past when those protest movements were not launched on their initiatives or controlled by their party. The PKK for example displayed a passive attitude during the Kurdish intifada in Syria in 2004, seeking more to calm the Kurds who rose up against the oppression of the Assad regime. It displayed a passive attitude at the beginning of the Syrian revolutionary process in 2011. Similarly in 2013 during the popular mobilizations in Turkey following the issue of the Gezi Park, the PKK carefully avoided any statement about the popular protests, while many Kurdish activists joined the protesters individually in Istanbul and other large cities. The PKK favoured at the time the consolidation and continuation of the peace process with the government of the AKP.

Since then in view of the continued repression of the PKK and Kurdish activists in Turkey and the attitude of the Turkish AKP government regarding Kobani and the terrorists attacks against the Kurds in general and the HDP party in particular, the PKK has adopted a more hostile attitude toward the AKP in order to defend itself against the war launched by the AKP government. Let us

not forget the airstrikes against PKK bases and Kurdish civilians by the Turkish government.

We need to uphold a principled position of support for the Kurdish national liberation movement in its struggle for self-determination in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. It deserves, like all forms of struggle for liberation and emancipation, unconditional support. Once this fundamental principle has been established, it seems necessary to take a critical look at how these movements are led.

Finally, it seems necessary to repeat that any possibility for the self determination of the Kurdish people and concrete and long term amelioration of the living conditions of the Kurdish people, just as for the other religious and ethnic minorities in Syria, are linked to the deepening and victory of the revolutionary process in Syria and the achievement of its objectives against the Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary forces. The autonomous regions of Rojava are indeed a result of the mobilisation of the mass popular movement from below by the people of Syria (Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians together) against the criminal Assad regime began in March 2011. The rise of the popular uprising pushed the Assad regime to conclude a deal with the armed forces of the PYD in July 2012 in which they withdrew from several regions, current Rojava cantons, to redeploy its armed forces in other regions to repress them.

The defeat of the Syrian revolution and of the popular movement would therefore probably mark the end of the Rojava experience and the return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of Syria. The Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary forces would not allow any possible development of a political experience that is out of their authoritarian program.

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Joseph Daher interviewed by Frieda Afary

Notes

[1] <http://www.iscicephesi.net/ana-sayfa/english/2642-istanbul-declaration-break-the-siege-on-the-syrian-revolution-with-the-people-of-syria-down-with-bashar-daesh-and-the-imperialist-interventions>

[2] see political program and statements of the Revolutionary Left Current Website <http://revleftcurrentsyria.com>

[3] <https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com>; see for example available on ESSF (article 36549), [Despite everything, popular resistance in Syria - Celebrations of the fourth year of the revolution](#)

[4] See my blog

[5] <https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/demonstration-in-the-city-of-idlib-demanding-the-handing-over-of-the-citys-administration-to-its-people-۰-۰۰۰۰۰-۰۰-۰۰۰۰۰۰/>

P.S.

* Published by Zamaneh, a Persian-language human rights website and radio station on November 17, 2015. Article in Persian language:

<http://www.radiozamaneh.com/246346>

Also see an English summary of articles from Zamaneh's special page on "War in the Region and Iran's Share of Responsibility for the Syria Crisis."

<http://en.radiozamaneh.com/articles/iranian-intellectuals-analyzeoppose-irans-role-in-syria/>

English version:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/11/17/interview-with-radio-zamaneh-on-the-syrian-democratic-and-revolutionary-opposition/>