

Syria's Disaster, and What's Next - For a progressive alternative based on “unity and conquer.”

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MORE THAN SEVEN years after the beginning of the Syrian popular uprising, which was gradually transformed into a deadly war with an international character, the situation in the country is catastrophic at all levels. The popular classes are the most affected with continuous suffering.

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At the end of 2017, some 13.1 million people in Syria required humanitarian assistance. Of these, 5.6 million are in acute need due to a convergence of vulnerabilities resulting from displacement, exposure to hostilities, and limited access to basic goods and services. [1] More than half the population was displaced internally or outside the country, forced to leave their homes as a result of the war.

More than 920,000 people have been displaced in Syria during the first four months of this year, a record number since the conflict began. And life for Syrian refugees in neighboring countries means poverty, exploitation and discriminatory policies.

The World Bank estimated in June 2017 that about one third of all buildings and nearly half of all Syrian schools and hospitals had been damaged or destroyed. The Gross Domestic Product, which in 2010 stood at \$60.2 billion, dropped to only \$12.4 billion in 2016. Over 80% of the population lives below the poverty line.

Bashar al-Assad's regime, with the help of its Iranian and Russian allies as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah, has continued to recover territory. Outside Bashar al-Assad's territory, military offensives and bombardments against civilians have continued. In April 2018, regime forces with the assistance of Russia and Iran conquered Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. The offensive included the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

In mid-July, following a military campaign and a series of so-called “local reconciliation agreements” — leading to a few hundred Syrian opposition fighters and their families who refused surrender terms to be taken on buses to opposition-held areas in the north — the Syrian regime assisted by its Russian ally had regained near-total control of Dara'a province. This includes the Nasib border crossing, a step a senior Jordanian official called “positive.” The crossing is strategically and economically important and will reopen key trade routes for Damascus.

The military campaign in this area has triggered a new forced displacement. Despite the return of some tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had previously settled in the Nasib border area, as of mid-July an estimated 234,500 people remain displaced across southwest Syria.

Some 70% of these, around 160,000 people, were located in Quneitra, many in close proximity to the Golan area and with limited access to humanitarian assistance. The living conditions for the IDPs were very difficult, with many crowded into open areas, camps and informal settlements. [2] Both Jordan and Israel locked down their borders to all internally displaced persons. *[Note: In the recent evacuation of White Helmet volunteers, Jordan and Israel specified that they must be resettled elsewhere, in Europe or Canada — ed.]*

As a reminder, one year ago, in July 2017 U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin had agreed to a ceasefire in Dara'a and its environs, calling it a “de-escalation zone.” No mention was made by U.S. officials of this agreement during the military campaign led by the Syrian regime in Dara'a's province. Washington made clear to the armed opposition forces that it once backed not to expect intervention. This led to their surrender.

By the beginning of August 2018, regime forces with the support of its foreign allies controlled the entirety of southwestern Syria for the first time since 2012. This was finalized with the capture of two villages near the Syrian-Jordanian border and reported evacuation of hundreds of Islamic State (IS) fighters. The regime with its allies' help now controls more than 60% of Syrian territory and nearly 75% of the population. But much of the north — mostly in Idlib province and a chunk of the east — remain out of Assad's hands. The presence of Turkish and U.S. forces in those areas might complicate further gains, at least temporarily.

Idlib province, now home to between 2.5 and three million persons of whom 1.5 million are reportedly IDPs, is controlled by the jihadist coalition Hayat Tahrir Sham (HTS, led by formally al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra), which has imposed its own institutions and violently repressed activist networks and civil society organizations.

State of the Opposition

The Idlib region has suffered deadly bombing campaigns of the regime's and Russian air forces, killing and wounding many despite being part of a “de-escalation” zone agreed upon by Russia, Iran and Turkey last September in Astana (capital of Kazakhstan). It has also witnessed great instability with violent clashes between HTS and rival armed groups, including the salafist [extreme fundamentalist — ed.] coalition Jabhat Tahrir Suria (JTS, with leading elements Ahrar al-Sham and Nureddin al-Zinki), provoking the rejection and hostility of local populations against these reactionary forces. These reactionary armed groups have also committed significant violations of human rights against local populations.

Despite these conditions, civilian resistance actions have regularly continued against the oppressive ruling HTS, in which women have played an important role. [3] Resistance has taken the form of strikes, public demonstrations, establishment of women's centers, statements, but without consolidating into an organized democratic political opposition able to challenge reactionary jihadist and salafist forces.

Turkish armed forces have established a significant presence in Idlib province, including a 12th military observation post in mid-May 2018. Deployment of Turkish forces is based on the Astana agreement with Russia. President Tayyip Erdogan has been pressing Russian President Vladimir

Putin to make sure that no military intervention against the Syrian army occurs in Idlib.

In addition to supporting groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic conservative forces, Ankara has also directly increased its political influence in the northern areas of Syria under its control through various other means. Turkish police in 2016 and 2017 trained 5,000 Syrians for a parallel police organization, Turkey's postal service opened branches in Jarablus, al-Bab and Cobanbey, and Turkish-sponsored institutions and universities were opened in a number of cities. The families of the armed opposition fighters who died in the Turkish-led military campaign "Operation Olive Branch" against Afrin in March 2018 have also received death gratuity payments from the Turkish government.

Selahattin Yildirim, an individual who is attached to Turkey's Office of Religious Affairs, was appointed mufti of al-Bab. Ankara has also pushed for the establishment of an industrial zone and a power station near al-Bab. [4]

Turkey's main motivations for its presence in these areas are to encourage the return of a small portion of Syrian refugees in Turkey to these areas, and above all to prevent any possibility of a PYD-led (Democratic Union Party) Kurdish autonomy zone in northeastern Syria.

The Northern and Eastern territories controlled by the PYD are also under continuous threats by various local, regional and international actors. At the beginning of the year, Russia gave the green light for Turkey's Orwellian-named "Operation Olive Branch" offensive against the Kurdish enclave in Afrin. In June, Washington and Ankara agreed on a plan for the withdrawal of YPG (People's Protection Units) Kurdish fighters from the northern Syrian city of Manbij, replaced by American and Turkish armed forces.

PYD officials have increasingly been critical of the United States because of this agreement and U.S. acceptance of Turkish occupation of Afrin. Once again, we can see that international and regional powers are unwilling to support Kurdish self-determination and will sacrifice its interests for their own benefit. [5]

In addition, U.S. President Trump has announced on several occasions his willingness to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria once the Islamic State was defeated, although without setting a deadline. The U.S. administration has also decided to cut funding for stabilization and civil society projects in northwestern Syria, while other projects are under review.

The Syrian Coalition, composed mainly of Islamic fundamentalists and conservative groups and personalities, not only supported Turkish military intervention and continued chauvinistic and racist policies against the Syrian Kurds in Syria, but also participated in the operation by calling on Syrian refugees in Turkey to join the Syrian armed opposition groups fighting against Kurdish forces in Afrin. It also supported the Turkish and American agreement in Manbij.

At the same time, the Assad regime has continuously threatened to regain control of northern Syria by force if the PYD refused to capitulate. Damascus has also denounced the presence of Turkish and American forces in the city of Manbij. The areas controlled by PYD-led forces include oil, farmland and water resources critical to the economy.

Faced with these multiple threats, some PYD officials have declared their availability to begin talks without preconditions with the regime. As argued for example by Aldar Khalil, co-chair of the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) linked to the PYD, "Conditions have changed. It's time to find a solution with Damascus."

In this context, with increasing international pressure, by the end of July the Syrian Democratic

Council (SDC), the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), publicly acknowledged for the first time entering into talks with the Syrian regime for a road map leading to a democratic and decentralized federal system. However, as SDF officials themselves acknowledged, major challenges stand in the way of future talks, notably the continuing refusal of any recognition of global Kurdish rights and a federal political system.

Despite the PYD's own authoritarian practices and mainly top-down rule in its managed areas, its experience has been hailed for the high inclusion and participation of women in all sectors of society, the secularization of laws and institutions, and to some extent the integration and participation of various ethnic and religious minorities.

In both cases, progressives should oppose the bombing and threats by the regime's military offensives assisted by its foreign allies against Idlib and the Eastern region, in which millions of displaced civilians have taken refuge.

Reconstruction and Refugees

The Assad regime, as it accumulates new military victories and captures new territories with the assistance of its foreign allies, has begun to envision the issue of reconstruction and establish the conditions for stabilizing territories under its control. The cost of reconstruction is estimated at around \$350 billion, creating an appetite from national and foreign actors even though the war is unfinished.

This situation, however, faces numerous challenges, ranging from the lack of national capital for reconstruction to crony capitalists' eagerness to expand their wealth, the behavior of the numerous pro-regime militias throughout the country, and finally the continuing existence of salafist-jihadist forces.

For Assad, his relatives and the businessmen linked to his regime, reconstruction is a means of consolidating their already acquired powers and re-establishing their political, military, security and economic domination, along with the forced resettlement of populations. This process would also reinforce the neoliberal policies — which helped trigger the popular uprising in 2011 — of a heavily indebted regime that does not have the capacity to finance reconstruction on its own.

The regime's current reconstruction projects are likely to reinforce social and regional inequalities, exacerbating development problems already present before the uprising. Alongside its increasing dependence on its foreign allies Russia and Iran, Assad's regime has bolstered its patrimonial nature, particularly in the increasing role played by crony capitalists.

In April 2018, the Assad regime issued a new legislative law, Decree No. 10, which raised new fears of stripping citizens who left the country of their properties. Decree No. 10 was enacted as an amendment to Decree No. 66 of 2012, and stipulated that property owners would have to submit their deeds to the relevant local administrative units within 30 days. (Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem announced that the time limit was extended to a year, although this is not yet officially sanctioned.)

If unable, people could ask their relatives to do so or be represented by an attorney. The law's main purpose, however, is the seizure of properties abandoned by civilians forced to leave the country, especially in former opposition-held areas. The result would enable new land registrations, excluding from these a vast number of real estate owners. Through the reconstruction of the administrative structure, the property of civilians forced to flee would be seized.

By allowing the destruction and expropriation of large areas, Decree 66 of 2012 and Decree 10 of 2018 create an efficient instrument for large development projects benefiting regime cronies, while at the same time operating as a punitive measure against populations known for opposition to the regime. This may include some social and possible sectarian engineering (although not on a countrywide basis) in some specific areas. Residential developments would be carried out formally through holding companies owned by governorates or municipalities, but construction and management of the projects would likely be contracted out to private-sector companies owned by well-connected investors.

The return of civilians to certain areas was also made difficult by various measures requested by the regime's assorted security institutions. Individuals first had to possess the necessary documents to access their destroyed property. The war demolished many Syrian land registries, including by deliberate initiative of pro-regime forces in some recaptured areas.

According to approximate pre-war estimates by the Ministry of Local Government, only about 50% of land in Syria was officially registered. Another 40% had boundaries delimited but remained unregistered. Multiple land registries were paper-based and often without proper storage.

In addition, a significant section of displaced people lost their ownership documents or lacked them in the first place, according to Laura Cunial, a legal and housing expert at the Norwegian Refugee Council. Nearly half of Syrian refugees surveyed by the council and the United Nations Refugee Agency said that their homes had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the war. Only nine per cent had their property deeds with them and in good condition, according to the survey published in 2017.

Wide sections of those refugees actually came from informal areas, which represented around 40% of all housing units in Syria — where property records were often absent. Analysts estimated that it was likely that more than two million lawsuits by Syrians to seek restitution for lost and damaged property, a right under international law, could be filed at the end of the conflict.

Even those who had the necessary documents often found it difficult to reach their properties. Access to the areas controlled by the regime often required obtaining entry permits from various branches of security to cross checkpoints. This process involved blackmail, bribes and threats of detention.

Once a resident received a security clearance to enter the city, another permit was required before the reconstruction of a destroyed house could begin. Residents were also required to pay electricity, telephone and water bills for the years of absence during the war, nearly 50% of the cost of these assets. Of course opposition activists and supporters are not likely to return out of fear of detention and torture, nor do they see any possibility of compensation for their losses.

Since 2017, improvements have been seen in the Syrian business environment after years of steep decline. Revenues are increasing in various sectors including luxury hotels, transport and logistics. However, deep and significant socio-economic problems remain, particularly given the devastation of Syria's male work force. They have been hit by death, disability, forced displacement and disappearance. Those who remain have largely been sucked into a violent and corrupting system centered around armed factions. Yet this has inadvertently opened the door to previously male-dominated work, with women now occupying more space both in society and in the workforce.

The conquest of Eastern Ghouta and Dara'a province in April and July 2018 would also have positive impact on the economy for the regime. In Eastern Ghouta this would restore in the near future the production of hundreds of factories that were not destroyed or too severely damaged by regime

bombing. This region was a major supplier of food products to Damascus. In addition there are many textile, chemicals and furniture factories.

In Dara'a province, the Nasib border crossing with Jordan was the major issue as it was strategically and economically important to the reopening of key trade routes for Damascus. Syrian exporters would have access again to the Gulf countries, an important market before 2011. Imports from Jordan and the Gulf would also be available at a lower cost.

With Syria as the only land route for Lebanese exports to the Gulf and Iraq, transit revenues to and from Lebanon would also increase. A few weeks before the takeover of the Nasib border, the Homs-Hama motorway reopened, also facilitating the transport and exchange of merchandise.

In early 2018, and in order to reduce reliance on imports, the regime implemented measures to encourage investments and reconstruction in industrial sites. At the end of May, a presidential decree exempted all manufacturers owning factories in an industrial city or zone from payment of the fee for the construction license needed to start building or expanding a factory. By the summer initiatives were extended to Syrian businessmen living abroad, particularly from Egypt, both to encourage investments in the country and to facilitate a resumption of production at their facilities.

The regime's regaining of territories and small improvements in the economic situation does not mean, however, an end of problems for the Syrian regime — in fact quite the contrary. Damascus will have to face a series of contradictions and challenges: on one hand, satisfying the interests of the businessmen linked to the regime and the militias; on the other, accumulating capital through economic and political stability while granting its foreign allies major shares in the reconstruction process.

Today, these objectives rarely overlap. In addition there is the ongoing threat of jihadist forces that could increasingly turn towards terrorist attacks in urban centers. The latest example was in July, when soldiers of the IS killed at least 250 civilians in a devastating and meticulously planned attack on mostly regime-held Druze-majority Suwayda.

While foreign states allied to the regime lack sufficient capital for the reconstruction of Syria, the Gulf monarchies, European Union and the United States are still highly reluctant to participate. In December 2017, the U.S. Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee unveiled a No Assistance for Assad Act, which would prevent the Trump administration from using non-humanitarian U.S. aid funds for the reconstruction of Syria in areas held by the Assad regime or associated forces.

In mid-July 2018, Russia offered the USA a cooperation proposal to rebuild Syria and repatriate its refugees. But Washington continues to maintain its position of refusing to support such efforts if there is no political solution to end the civil war, including steps such as elections supervised by the United Nations.

Regional Actors: Assad OK, Iran No...

While the issue of regime overthrow was never really on the table for the international and regional actors — but rather, superficial changes at its head — they have now pretty much accepted Assad staying in power. The main question today is the presence and influence of Iran in Syria, which particularly faces the hostility of the USA, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

In a March 2018 interview, for example, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman said that Bashar al-Assad was staying, but hoped he would not become a "puppet" for Tehran. U.S. Secretary

of State Mike Pompeo listed in May Iran's withdrawal from Syria as one of 12 preconditions for removing sanctions against Iran after the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal.

In July 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel did not object to Assad re-exerting control over the country and stabilizing his regime's power, but Israel would act to protect its borders against the Syrian military if necessary — as it has in the past. He added "We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights."

This position is nothing new, as Israel does not want to see any radical changes at its borders and is happy with a weakened Syrian regime. Israeli authorities, however, have publicly stated opposition to any Iranian or Hezbollah troops close to Israel's borders, and called on Russia to prevent this from happening. Especially from 2017, as the regime's survival was more or less guaranteed, Israel multiplied its attacks against Hezbollah and pro-Iranian targets in Syria.

In September 2017, former Israeli air force chief Amir Eshel declared that Israel had hit arms convoys of the Syrian military and its Hezbollah allies nearly 100 times since the beginning of 2012. Assad's regime, unwilling to provoke Israel, never responded to these interventions. The one exception was in February 2018 when anti-aircraft fire downed an Israeli warplane returning from a bombing raid on Iran-backed positions in Syria.

Israel then launched a second and more intensive air raid, hitting what it stated were 12 Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria, including Syrian air defense systems. Following this confrontation, both Israel and Syria signaled they were not seeking wider conflict, while Russia and the USA were concerned about any more violent escalation.

As a gesture to appease the apprehensions of the Israeli state, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stressed at the end of February 2018 that his country's presence in Syria at the invitation of Damascus was not aimed at creating a new front against Israel, but at combating terrorism. This was not enough to appease Israel's fears. Washington's aggressive policy against Iran and decision to put an end to the nuclear deal with Tehran in May 2018 also encouraged Tel Aviv to pursue its attacks in Syria against Iranian and Hezbollah targets.

Israel's main objective today in dealing with Russia includes removing the missiles aimed at it from Syria, the withdrawal of Iranian and Hezbollah forces, and preservation of the 1974 disengagement agreements with Syria on the Golan Heights.

The United States wants to replace Iranian with Russian influence in Syria. Russia's domination is seen as more accommodating to U.S. interests in the region because of Moscow's close relations with Tel Aviv. It could limit Tehran's possibilities for transferring arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, therefore weakening Hezbollah and Iranian influence. Moscow also entertains good relations with other U.S. regional allies including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies.

There were expectations that in the mid-July 2018 summit between Trump and Putin in Helsinki, the issue of Iranian presence in Syria would be on the table as one of the main themes of discussion, alongside discussion on oil and natural gas. In the lead up to this meeting, White House national security adviser John Bolton had actually declared "there are possibilities for doing a larger negotiation on helping to get Iranian forces out of Syria and back into Iran, which would be a significant step forward." Washington had significant incentives to convince Russia to push Iran out of Syria, such as lifting U.S. sanctions and stopping its opposition to construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that will convey Russian gas to Germany and beyond.

A few days before the Helsinki summit, Ali Akbar Velayati, a top aide to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated: "Iran and Russia's presence in Syria will continue to protect the country against terrorist groups and America's aggression... We will immediately leave if Iraqi and Syrian governments want it, not because of Israel and America's pressure." [6]

However after the Helsinki summit, the Kremlin downplayed expectations, saying it did not expect much from the meeting but hoped it would be a "first step" to resolving a crisis in relations.

Many other elements also prevented Russia's willingness or ability to pressure Iran's force to leave Syria, while many disagreements still exist between Moscow and Washington, despite the eagerness of Trump to improve relations. The lifting of sanctions against Russia requires support of Congress, and Trump may be unable to overcome bipartisan opposition.

For example, after he called Putin a "competitor" and "not my enemy" during the NATO summit in mid July, Republican Senator John McCain said in response "Putin is not America's friend, nor merely a competitor. Putin is America's enemy — not because we wish it so, but because he has chosen to be." Democratic U.S. Representative Gregory Meeks, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, accused Trump's presidency of having become a propaganda arm for the Kremlin.

Even within Trump's administration, opposition to Moscow can be found. U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis described Russia's role in the Balkan region after talks with ministers of defense of the countries of this region in Zagreb, Croatia as a "destabilizing element," while last year U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, during a trip to the same region, also openly accused Russia of working to destabilize the western Balkans.

While Iran and Russia have worked closely together in Syria, differences and disagreement persist. Russia has very good relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia, two archenemies of Iran. Russian-Israeli relations have evolved positively under Putin's presidency with closer collaborations. Since the start of Russian air strikes in Syria, Russia and Israel have been careful to coordinate their military activities along the Syrian-Israeli border in order to prevent accidents. Israeli bombing in Syria of Iranian and Hezbollah targets has occurred with Russian agreement.

Tensions in the field between Russian and Iranian proxy forces occurred, for example in June when Russian forces arrived unannounced in an area of Hezbollah deployment near the Lebanese border. The Russians withdrew the following day.

Influence on the ground within the country is also distributed and implemented unevenly, with consequences for the future. Moscow's forces have taken hold in economically strategic areas (through one military base in Hemeimem near the port of Tartus for control of economic trade, and one in Palmyra in the center of Syria for the control of gas and oil fields, in addition to one big military base in Hama), and they worked on the reformation and reconstruction of a Syrian Army nucleus (through the establishment of the 4th and 5th Corps).

On the other side, Tehran mainly relied on Shi'a fundamentalist militias (Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan) and Syrian paramilitary auxiliary forces (the National Defence Forces). At the same time, this has not prevented Iran from increasing its power in some regime structures through their networks on the ground. Both states have won important contracts regarding Syrian national resources and reconstruction plans.

These disagreements nevertheless did not generally translate, at the time of writing, into a deep rivalry or competing interests in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov actually stated in

the beginning of July that Iran is one of the key powers in the region, and that it would be “absolutely unrealistic” to expect it to abandon its interests in the country, while adding that regional powers should discuss mutual complaints and negotiate a compromise.

Russian foreign ministry officials have also repeatedly said that their presence is reasonable. Both states continue to stress their strong cooperation and mutual interests in Syria. More generally, Russia and Iran have shared interests on many other issues, for example in the fight against Sunni jihadists, in Eurasian transit routes, and in Transcaucasia and Central Asia.

In addition to this, the Iranians are now deeply embedded in the Syrian security forces, while also building a strong and extensive network of pro-Iranian Shi’a Islamic fundamentalist militias. Hezbollah and other Iranian-supported militias also participated “under the cover” of the Syrian regime’s army in the July 2018 military offensive in Dara’a’s province, exposing the limits of U.S. policy that hopes Moscow can get Iran and groups it backs out of the country.

It also defied Israeli demands that Iranian proxies be kept away from its border. At the end of July 2018, Moscow’s ambassador to Tel Aviv actually declared that Russia cannot compel Iranian forces to quit Syria. Equally, he maintained that Moscow could do nothing to prevent Israeli military strikes against Iranian forces in Syria. This declaration came after Russia had offered to keep Iranian forces at least 100 kilometers (60 miles) from the Golan Heights’ ceasefire lines. The offer was rejected by Israel as insufficient. Iranian influence in Syrian society has also expanded considerably, notably with the establishment of institutions linked to the Islamic Republic.

All these conditions make the possibility of pushing Iran out of Syria very difficult. On its side, the Syrian regime is unwilling for the moment to see the departure of Iranian and its proxy forces. In an interview with a state-run Iranian TV channel in June 2018, Bashar al-Assad declared that the evolving dynamics in southern and northern Syria would not alter “strategic” relations between Damascus and Tehran.

Assad emphasized that his government would be open to permitting Iran to establish military bases on Syrian soil if needed. Syria has been Iran’s principal strategic ally in the region for a long period now, and has been essential for providing and resupplying Iran’s proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, which plays an important role in achieving strategic security depth vis-a-vis Israel and the United States.

Because the Assad regime protected these supply routes, Tehran has supported it militarily, economically and politically. Iran also saw the Syrian uprising as providing its regional rivals, especially Saudi Arabia, with an opportunity to diminish the standing of an important ally and undermine its power and influence in the Middle East.

For the Syrian ruler, maintaining both Russia and Iran as close allies is also a way to balance these forces against each other at some periods of pressure, and guarantee some form of autonomy for his own power.

Conclusion

Syria’s popular classes have suffered tremendously from destruction and deaths since 2011, while progressive and democratic forces within the popular movement have been violently repressed by the regime’s forces on one side, and jihadist and Islamic fundamentalist movements on the other. The most important issue today is the end of the war.

This is not in contradiction with reaffirming our opposition to the Assad regime, to refuse its re-

legitimation internationally — not to forget the war crimes, the tens of thousands of political prisoners still tortured in the regime's jails, the disappeared, the refugees, and the internally displaced, etc.

A blank check given today to Assad and his crimes would be a further abandonment of the Syrian popular classes and their heroic resistance, and would inevitably increase the sense of impunity of all authoritarian and despotic states in the region and elsewhere, allowing them in turn to crush their populations if they were to revolt.

All international and regional actors have also participated in the suffering of the Syrian popular classes, notably by supporting the regime and/or various reactionary forces. This is why it is important to continue to denounce all foreign military interventions that oppose aspirations for democratic change in Syria, whether in support of the regime (Russia, Iran, Hezbollah) or by proclaiming themselves "friends of the Syrian people" (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, United States, etc.). The Syrian popular classes struggling for freedom and dignity have found no friendly state in their struggle.

The region is witnessing longterm revolutionary processes, characterized by higher- and lower-level mobilizations according to the context. They are even characterized by some periods of defeat, but it's hard to say when they will end. This is especially the case in Syria, when the conditions that allowed for the beginning of these uprisings are still present, and the regime is far from finding ways to solve them.

These conditions, however, are not enough to transform them into political opportunities, particularly after more than seven years of a destructive and murderous war accompanied by a general fatigue in the Syrian population, now just seeking in its great majority to return to stability.

The effects of the war and its destruction will most probably linger for years. Alongside this situation, no structured opposition body was present with a significant size and following that offered an inclusive and democratic project appealing to large sectors of society.

The failures of the opposition bodies in exile and armed opposition groups left important frustrations and bitterness in people who participated and/or sympathized with the uprising. From this perspective, it is urgent to strengthen efforts throughout the world aimed at recreating genuine internationalist and progressive solidarity, denouncing all the international and regional imperialist powers without exception.

The memory and political experiences of the Syrian revolutionary process must now be used to (re)build resistance and a progressive alternative, in which the many activists in exile will have a role to play. The internationalist solidarity movement has the responsibility to support the development of these networks.

We must recall the original objectives of the Syrian popular uprising for democracy, social justice and equality, against all forms of racism and sectarianism. This is the only way to replace the Assad regime policies of "divide and conquer" to a progressive alternative based on "unity and conquer."

Joseph Daher

P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 196, September/October 2018:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/196/syrias-disaster/#R3>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2018-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-enar>
- [2] <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-dar-quneitra-sweida-situation-report-no-2-11-july>
- [3] ESSF (article 45876), [North West Syria: Women are at the forefront of challenging extremism in Idlib](#).
- [4] <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/turkey-syria-turkish-university-in-al-bab.html>
- [5] <http://syriadirect.org/news/us-backed-opposition-authorities-in-northern-syria-push-for-decentralization-agreement-with-damascus.sdf>
- [6] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-syria-iraq/iran-will-leave-syria-iraq-only-if-baghdad-damascus-want-it-aide-to-khamenei-says-idUSKBN1K3168>