

Historical Lessons of the Syrian Revolution – A critical balance sheet

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More than 9 years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the situation is more than catastrophic for the popular classes in the country. It is facing a deep humanitarian crisis with 11.7 million persons in need of humanitarian assistance, while more than 5.6 million Syrians are living as refugees across the Middle East. Overall poverty rates are over 80 percent, while the cost of reconstruction has been estimated at around \$400 billion.

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The recent outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis has further intensified the socio-economic plight of the vast majority of the Syrians. The Assad regime destroyed countless hospitals, leaving a dilapidated and underfunded healthcare system bereft of medicine and medical supplies by international sanctions at the very moment that the virus stands poised to rip through the population.

Assad now rules over over 70 percent of Syrian territory. Assisted by Russia, Iran and the Lebanon's Hezbollah, he turned back the initial uprising and largely won what had devolved into a regional and international war.

It is time to assess the lessons of the Syrian uprising, which initially called for democracy, social justice and equality and opposed racism and sectarianism. Why did it lose? Some provisional explanations and lessons can now be presented, although these should be seen as initial thoughts to be developed in debate and dialog with all those interested in emancipation and liberation of the popular classes and oppressed peoples.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

We must start with an understanding of the roots of the revolt in Syria and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The region is at the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process rooted in the failure of the region's political economy to meet the aspirations of its working classes and oppressed peoples.

The region's states are run variously by clannish oligarchies and military dictatorships that oversee a predominantly rentier economy based on fossil fuels as well as other resources. In patrimonial rentier states, power is concentrated in one family and its clique like the Assads in Syria. The ruling families consider the state as their private property and used all its repressive power to protect its

rule.

Other states such as Egypt, Algeria and Sudan are neo-patrimonial. In these, the military establishment has held power rather than a single family. This enabled the military, when faced with mass protests as in Egypt, to replace the dictator with another and safeguard the structure of the regime and its own power.

The difference in the nature of these regimes was a key aspect in explaining the different paths of popular uprisings in the region. Patrimonial regimes were less flexible and needed to turn to outright repression as in Syria, while neo-patrimonial were able to get rid of despised rulers while preserving the existing order.

These regimes and their role in the world economy have distorted the region's development—overly focusing on extracting oil and natural gas, under-developing productive sectors, overdeveloping service sectors, and fueling various forms of speculative investment especially in real estate. For the popular classes, shut out of these spoils, this has produced migration of skilled labor out of the region and massive rates of unemployment and underemployment especially among young people.

The region's political economy thus created pre-revolutionary situation. The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of the masses, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequalities, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which needed no more than a spark.

That was provided by rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt. They inspired people in other countries to rise up. In Syria, large segments of the population took to the streets with the very same demands raised by other revolts—freedom, dignity, democracy, social justice, and equality.

The region's political economy thus created pre-revolutionary situation. The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of the masses, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequalities, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which needed no more than a spark. As often in happens in popular uprising, Syrians created alternative institutions to the existing state. Protesters established coordination committees and local councils, providing services to the local population and coordinating the movement. In liberated territories, revolutionaries created a situation close to dual power challenging the regime's power.

Of course, we must not exaggerate this; the alternative system of democratic self-rule never fully developed and there were problems with it, especially the underrepresentation of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Nevertheless, the committees and councils successfully formed a political alternative that could appeal to large sections of the population.

FORCES OF COUNTER REVOLUTION

These democratic organs were progressively undermined by several counter-revolutionary forces. The first and foremost was of course Assad's despotic regime, which aimed to crush the uprising militarily.

This regime remains the most important threat to Syria's popular classes. The resilience of the regime was rooted in the mobilization of its popular base through sectarian, tribal, regional, and clientelist connections, as well as in the massive foreign support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.

The second counterrevolutionary force was the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist military organizations. They did not have the same destructive capacities as Assad's state apparatus, but

they radically opposed the initial demands and objectives of the uprising, attacked democratic elements of the protest movement, and sought to impose a new authoritarian and exclusive political system.

Finally, the regional powers and imperialist international states formed the third force of counter-revolution. The assistance provided by the Damascus allies Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, in addition to foreign Shi'a fundamentalist militias sponsored by Tehran, provided the regime crucial political, economic, and military levels that enabled it to survive.

These regional forces viewed the protest movement in Syria and the possible fall of the Assad regime as a threat to their geopolitical interests. As they increased their influence over the country's society and state, Tehran and Moscow in particular became more invested in the regime's survival and the exploitation of the country's reconstruction as well as its natural resources.

Against these players, the so called "Friends of Syria" (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) formed another international force of counter-revolution. They supported most reactionary Islamic fundamentalist groups, helped transform the uprising into a sectarian or ethnic war, and at every step opposed the democratic uprising out of fear of it as a potential threat to their own autocratic regimes.

The Western states led by the USA also did not want to see any radical change in Syria and rejected any plans to aid the progressive armed forces fighting to topple Assad. US policy has been focused on regime stabilization and carrying out the s-called "War on Terror" against ISIS.

For a while, the US did call for Assad to step down and was looking for an amenable general they could control, but once that was off the table, they abandoned that demand and have accepted, along with the rest of the regional and international powers, his continued rule. Despite the divisions between the various regional and international players, they were all united in opposition to the uprising and all aimed to prevent its spread beyond the country's borders.

SUBJECTIVE WEAKNESS ON THE LEFT

The various counter-revolutionary actors all helped crush the Syrian uprising. While we should not shy away from blaming the defeat on these forces, we must also examine and criticize the mistakes and shortcomings of the Syrian opposition.

One of the most important problems in the opposition was the mistaken alliance pursued by liberals and some leftists with the Muslim Brotherhoods and other Islamic fundamentalist groups and their international backers, which opposed the basic democratic demands of the uprising, especially those of women, oppressed religious minorities, and ethnic groups. This mistaken alliance helped shatter the inclusiveness of the initial popular movement in Syria [\[1\]](#). These shortcomings were present prior to the uprising, but appeared more clearly with it.

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The various leftist groups were too weak after decades of repression at the hands of the regime to constitute an organized democratic and progressive independent pole. As a result, the opposition to Assad failed to present a viable political alternative that could galvanize the popular classes and oppressed groups.

The failure to address the questions stands out in particular on two main issues: women and Kurds. In both cases, wide sectors of the Syrian opposition reproduced discriminatory and exclusionary policies against these groups, alienating key forces that would have been crucial to unite against the regime.

To win the opposition would have had to combine struggles against autocracy, exploitation and oppression. If it had raised democratic demands as well as demands in the interests of all workers and those for Kurdish self-determination and women's liberation it would have been in a much stronger position to build much deeper and more extensive solidarity among the social forces in the Syria Revolution.

Another weakness of the opposition was the weak development of mass class organization and progressive political organization. The revolts in Tunisia and Sudan demonstrate the importance of mass trade union organization such as the Tunisian UGTT and the Sudanese Professional Associations in cohering successful mass struggle.

Similarly, feminist mass organizations have been of particular significance in Tunisia and Sudan for promoting women's rights and winning democratic and socio-economic rights, even if they remain fragile and not fully consolidated. Syrian revolutionaries did not have these organized forces in place or at the same level of mass organizations, weakening the movement, and they will be essential to construct for future struggles.

The left must participate in the construction and development of such large alternative political structures.

The final key weakness that must be assessed and overcome is the weakness of the regional left and its networks of collaboration. Right now, the left must come together to help forge an alternative to the various counter-revolutionary actors within their countries as well as regionally and internationally.

We are in the midst of an intersecting revolutionary process in the region and we need a left that draws on lessons and inspirations of struggles in each country. A defeat in one country is a defeat for all, and victory in one country is a victory for others throughout the region.

Despotic regimes understand this and so should we. They share lessons with each other to defend their authoritarian, neoliberal order. We need more collaboration on our side especially among progressive forces in the region and internationally. No socialist solution can be found in one country or in one region, especially one like the Middle East and North Africa, which has been a battleground for regional and imperialist powers.

FOR AN INTERNATIONALIST LEFT

This collaboration must extend to the international left, including in the imperialist powers. Far too much of the left betrayed the Syrian Revolution, refusing to extend solidarity to the progressive popular forces.

There are many reasons for this betrayal, but perhaps the most important is the left's retreat from the socialist principle of self-emancipation, the idea that only the popular masses can free themselves through their own struggle for reform and revolution. Instead of this stance, which would have led the left to stand in solidarity with the Syrian uprising, much of the left in the name of "anti-imperialism" sided with the Assad regime against US imperialism.

Even worse, they sided with other supposedly “lesser evil” imperial and regional powers like Russia and Iran that intervened to save Assad. In the process, they exposed that their “anti-imperialism” was nothing more than rhetoric, and that their political practice amounted to nothing more than siding with one capitalist state or group of capitalist states against others, ignoring, betraying or even worse defaming the struggle of the masses for their own liberation.

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This stance also impacted anti-war movements especially in the US and Britain. For the most part they refused to extend solidarity to the revolution under the pretext that “main enemy is at home.” While of course true, especially in the case of the US state, which remains the biggest opponent of progressive social change in the world, that does not mean anti-war movements opposed to their own states should be agnostic about other international and regional imperialisms or popular revolutions.

Instead, they should have had opposed the US and UK, opposed other lesser imperialisms, and extended solidarity with the Syrian uprising. That is the only way for the left to build genuine internationalism that opposes all imperialisms, links popular struggles for revolution and national liberation, and builds a global fight from below for socialism.

We are in an opportune environment to promote such internationalism. Over the last year, we have witnessed another wave of popular revolt challenging neoliberalism and authoritarianism throughout large parts of the world, and though the pandemic and global recession may temporarily set that back, it will deepen the questioning of the system over the coming years and stoke even more radical uprisings. We must forge a new left internationally dedicated to leading them to victory.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Syria and the MENA will not be exempt from these dynamics. A new storm is brewing even in those countries like Syria that suffered catastrophic counterrevolutions.

This is why having a perspective that revolutionary processes like the one in the MENA region are epoch which can go through phases revolution and defeat followed by new revolutionary uprisings. In Syria, the conditions that led to the uprisings are all still present, and the regime has not only been unable to address them but has actually has exacerbated them.

Damascus and other regional capitals believe that they can maintain their despotic rules by the continuous use of massive violence against their populations. This is doomed to fail, and new explosions of popular protest should be expected just like those that have recently erupted in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Despite all the backing of its foreign allies, the Assad regime for all its resilience faces intractable problems. Its failure to resolve the country’s deep socio-economic issues combined with its unceasing repression has provoked criticism and some new protests.

In mid-January 2020, several demonstrations took place in the province of Sweida to oppose the

Syrian regime's failure to redress poverty and unemployment. More recently, protests against the regime have multiplied in the province of Daraa and rural areas around Damascus.

However, these conditions do not automatically translate into political opportunities, particularly after more than nine years of a destructive and murderous war. The absence of a structured, independent, democratic, and inclusive Syrian political opposition, which could appeal to the poorer classes, has made it difficult for various sectors of the population to unite and challenge the regime anew and on a national scale.

This is the main challenge. Though in difficult conditions of repression, poverty and social dislocation, a progressive political alternative must be organized in the local expression of resistance. And it must absorb some of the lessons I've tried to outline and draw inspiration from the new revolts in the region.

The international left, when the Syria Revolution rises again, must avowed the mistake so many made in response to its first stirring—siding with the regime or the regional and international forces of counter-revolution. Instead, the political compass of revolutionaries should be guided by the principle of solidarity with popular and progressive struggles from below.

As Che Guevara said, "If you tremble with indignation at every injustice then you are one of my comrades." Our destinies are linked.

Joseph Daher

P.S.

- Spectre. April 15, 2020:
<https://spectrejournal.com/historical-lessons-of-the-syrian-revolution/>

Footnotes

[1] More than 9 years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the situation is more than catastrophic for the popular classes in the country. It is facing a deep humanitarian crisis with 11.7 million persons in need of humanitarian assistance, while more than 5.6 million Syrians are living as refugees across the Middle East. Overall poverty rates are over 80 percent, while the cost of reconstruction has been estimated at around \$400 billion.