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Syria

One Year After the Beginning of the Revolution

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Who is Behind the Popular Movement?

The Syrian people have been struggling for a year now against a criminal and authoritarian regime. Over the past year, the regime has forgone any human consideration in its response to the uprising. Examples of human rights crimes include the recent massacres of women and children in Homs. Despite terrible repression, the popular movement in Syria continues to demonstrate in the streets to demand the overthrow of the regime.

The Syrian opposition has been very often reduced by the regional and international media to the Syrian National Council (SNC). In reality, the Syrian political scene is very rich and complex.

The SNC is a group of regime opponents in exile and is dominated by political parties, notably the Muslim Brotherhood and liberals, linked to Western imperialism and their clients in the Gulf. The SNC has called several times for foreign military intervention in Syria. The SNC is nevertheless not representative of the Syrian people and has almost no support inside Syria. Defections are happening slowly inside the SNC and ex-members are condemning its links with foreign powers. The SNC has been the target of protesters and of various groups struggling on the ground.

Many other groups are present in Syria and are struggling against the regime, including the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (a group inside the country, gathering together nationalists, leftists and Kurds), and the National Coalition gathering around 14 leftist political groups and organization asking for a democratic, social and civic Syria. Both organizations are opposed to any foreign military intervention. We find as well Kurdish and Assyrian parties, nationalists, and liberals, as well as several Islamist groups from different tendencies and not linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The main organizers of demonstrations, civil disobedience and campaign of strikes are nevertheless the coordination committees inside the country such as the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), grassroots activist networks helping organize and document protests (including through a daily newsletter for the international and Arabic media), the General Commission of the Syrian Revolution, the National Coordination Committee, and other local committees inside Syria. They are the real force of resistance, and have rejected foreign military interventions. This is why they have been the main targets of the regime since the beginning of the uprising.

The Popular Movement

In addition to the “traditional” opposition participating in the popular movement, including Kurdish parties, leftists, nationalists, liberals and Islamists, there are a number of different sections in the popular movement of Syria. Firstly we can find activists who were part of the struggle against the regime before the uprising and especially since the “Damascus spring” of 2001. Their activities have ranged from advocating for democracy in Syria, to defending the Palestinian cause and denouncing the US war on Iraq. They are mostly educated young men and women in their mid-20s and 30s. The majority are progressive seculars from all religious sects, including minorities such as Alawites, Christians, Druzes, etcetera.

These were the activists who organized one of the first demonstrations at the beginning of the uprising on March 16, 2011, the Family Vigil for Prisoners, a gathering of two hundred people that took place in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus. These same activists are now playing an important role in the coordination committees on the ground

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in Syria, and in the peaceful actions against the regime.

For example, the General Commission of the Syrian Revolution, a coalition of local committees, is headed by Suhair Atassi. Atassi was arrested for ten days following her participation as one of the organizers at the March 16 demonstration, and is now living in exile after months in hiding. The LCCs are headed notably by the lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, who has been living in hiding for more than ten months.

The regime has targeted specifically this kind of activists, the people behind the organization of demonstrations, civil disobedience, and strike campaigns. They have either been in jail or were killed, or have had to live in exile. Nevertheless, those who have survived still play an important role in the Syrian revolutionary process, and are trying to foment various popular forms of resistance against the regime.

The second and biggest section of the Syrian revolutionary movement includes the economically disenfranchised rural and urban working and middle classes who are experiencing the accelerated imposition of neoliberal policies by Bashar Al Assad since his arrival to power.

The process of economic liberalization has created greater inequality in Syria. The poorest are struggling to help themselves in the new economy due to a lack of employment opportunities, while the middle class is plummeting towards the poverty line because their incomes have not kept up with inflation, which rose to 17% in 2008. There is now 20-25% unemployment, reaching 55% for under-25s (in a country where people under 30 are 65% of the total population). The percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from eleven percent in 2000 to thirty-three percent in 2010. That is, about seven million Syrians live around or below the poverty line.

In agriculture, the dispossession of several hundred thousand farmers in the Northeast as a result of the drought should not be thought of as merely a natural disaster. The increase and intensive use of land by agro-businessmen – including land previously kept for grazing – as well as illegal drilling of water wells facilitated by paying off local administrators has contributed to the crisis of agriculture. Indeed, the expansion and intensification of land exploitation by large commercial farmers (agrobusiness), including land previously held for grazing, as well as the illegal drilling of wells and the establishment of selective water pipes meeting the requirements of the new landowners - all facilitated by the corruption of the local governments - have accelerated the agricultural crisis. According to the United Nations, in 2010 more than a million people were forced to migrate from the north-eastern region of Syria to urban centres.

The geography of the uprisings in Idlib and Deraa as well as other rural areas including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, historic bastions of the Baath Party that had not taken part on a massive scale in the insurrection of the 1980s, shows the involvement of the victims of neoliberalism in this revolution. Many from this group are joining the armed groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

As well, protesters may be observed gathering around sheiks in some neighborhoods and opposing the regime. As a result many sheikhs have been arrested, while others have fled the country.

The courage and the determination of the Syrian people in their struggle against the authoritarian regime for democracy, social justice and true independence has astonished the world. As Syrian revolutionaries have said since the beginning of the uprising, "The Syrian people will not kneel."

This past year, a new Syrian people rooted in revolutionary humanism and the struggle for freedom was born. We call on all men and women of conscience to support and bring solidarity to the Syrian people in their revolutionary struggle to overthrow a criminal and authoritarian regime. The revolution must continue.

Victory to the Syrian Revolution and mercy to our martyrs!

A Sectarian Movement?

Over the past year, Syria has been experiencing a popular and national uprising, bringing together all the communities encompassed by the Syrian state. Arab Sunnis are the bulk of the protesters because they are the majority of the population, but this does not mean the minorities do not play an important role in the uprising.

The activists in this movement are extremely diverse in terms of religion and ethnicity. The Syrian opposition has continuously presented a united front against the threat of national and sectarian civil war. The slogans of the demonstrators such as "We are all Syrians, we are united" are repeated constantly. In many demonstrations we have seen banners saying "No to sectarianism."

Alawite activists such as feminist Hanady Zahlout and long-time dissidents Habib Saleh, Samar Yazbeck, Louai Hussein and Fadwa Soleiman are figures of the opposition. An Alawite brigade was also formed recently in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the province of Idlib.

Kurdish activists are very present in the revolutionary process, though the press underplays their role. A number of these activists actually participated in the Kurdish intifada of 2004 in northern Syria, in which Kurdish protesters "part of a particularly disenfranchised population" were killed and imprisoned. Many Kurdish activists have been the targets of Syrian security forces during the current uprising.

And there are other groups whose members have joined the movement. Assyrians, a Christian population, are solidly participating in the Syrian revolution, joining from a deep-rooted history of activism. The cities of Salamiya and Mansaf have witnessed constant and massive protests since the beginning of the revolution, featuring predominantly secular youth from Ismailia backgrounds.

Many Palestinian refugees in Syria have participated in the revolution and suffered alongside their Syrian brothers and sisters, including refugees from Deraa, Latakia, where the refugee camp was bombed by Syrian forces, and Damascus, where rebellion is especially centered at the Yarmouk refugee camp. More than forty Palestinians have been killed by Syrian security services, while hundreds have been arrested and put in prison.

Syrian Christian revolutionaries have also been part of the uprising. Some are important figures of the opposition, including George Sabra, Michel Kilo, and lawyers such as the Bounni brothers and Michel Chammas. Recently, Officer Muteeh Ilyas Ilyas was the first Syrian Christian officer to defect from the Syrian army. Security forces killed many Syrian Christian activists. Hossam Mikhail was killed because of his links with the Free Syrian Army. Priest Basiliu Nassar was also assassinated while rescuing a victim of an army attack in the Jarajmah neighborhood in Hama. Nassar used to deliver food to areas attacked by the Syrian army, and was helping doctors out in Hama.

Syrian forces also fired a non-explosive missile at the Convent of our Lady of Saidnaya north of the capital Damascus after learning that its monks were involved in delivering medicine and supplies to bombed areas. In addition to delivering supplies to victims, several churches in Damascus and other Syrian cities have been giving lectures against the Syrian regime and its brutal repression of peaceful protestors. The Syrian regime issued instructions to all banks across the country to stop transactions with the Greek Orthodox Mariamite Church on charges of money laundering, according to a Syrian Christian activist from the southwestern governorate of Rif Dimashq.

A statement from Syrian Christian activists supporting the Revolution denounced the declaration by the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Rai last September in France that the overthrow of the Assad regime would be a threat to the Christians in Syria. They reminded Patriarch Rai that Christians have lived for “hundreds of years along with their Syrian brothers without fear and nobody, absolutely nobody, has any merit at this level: Christians are an indivisible part of this country.”

Facebook pages have appeared that reflect the diversity within the Syrian movement, such as “Alawi Coalition Against the Assad Family Regime,” “Committee of anti-Bashar Assad Alawi Youth - Homs,” “Syrian Christian Network for Supporting the Syrian Revolution,” and “News About the Involvement of Minorities in the Syrian Revolution.” There has also been a profusion of like-minded public statements, with titles like “Statement by Members of the Alawi Sect,” “Statement by Syrian Christians,” and “Statement in Favor of Citizenship.”

The Syrian coordination committees in the country also denounce sectarianism and defend the unity of the Syrian people. The Local Coordination Committees, grassroots activist networks helping to organize and document protests, also explained that the objective of Syria’s Revolution is not limited to overthrowing the regime, but also involves building a democratic system and national infrastructure that safeguards the freedom and dignity of the Syrian people.

The Syrian Revolution General Commission, which now boasts nearly 120 local committees, has also called for a peaceful revolution in order to build a democratic and socially just Syria.

The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook group issued a “code of ethics against sectarianism in Syria” as far back as March 2011. The naming of Friday demonstrations have been deliberately inclusive, designating for example the “Azadi” (Freedom in Kurdish) Friday, and the “Azime” (Great Friday) in honour of the Christian Friday of Easter weekend).

The Assad regime has always portrayed itself as the protector of the minorities against a so-called Islamic extremist threat. This argument is deployed by the authoritarian capitalist regime to divide Syrians and divert any criticism of its corruption, social inequalities, repression and absence of democracy.

The movement has united people, just as Egyptians and Tunisians united during their revolutions. No unity is possible under a dictatorship, which has developed a strategy of fomenting fear between sects. The popular movement in Syria is struggling for social solidarity that transcends sectarian and ethnic divisions. The only assurance and security the Syrians need is the victory of the revolution in order to build a new democratic, socialist and independent Syria.

Strategy, Tactics and Geopolitics

The Syrian revolution has always been characterized by its non-violent actions, from demonstrations to civil disobedience and strike campaigns as we saw in December 2011. But the regional and international press is focusing exclusively on the clashes between the Syrian army and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This has been contrasted with the peaceful nature of revolutions in places like Egypt. The use of arms by some sections of the Syrian opposition in self-defence has been condemned. The US and western countries have declared their refusal to arm the FSA.

In assessing the strategy of the FSA, it is worth remembering that there were more than 800 martyrs during the three

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weeks prior to the overthrow of Mubarak. At one point protesters used violence to resist the thugs sent by the Mubarak regime to invade Tahrir square. People in Syria and elsewhere have the right to defend themselves and their families against the oppression of an authoritarian regime. Did we deny this right to the Palestinian resistance against the racist, colonial occupation of their territory by the Israelis? Obviously not. The right to self-defence against the regime's repression is not in contradiction with the peaceful struggle of the popular movement and the overthrow of the regime.

This said, there is a need for debate around the role of the FSA in the revolutionary process.

Currently, the FSA is not a single and unified institution. It is more a label representing a number of independent armed groups located in various areas of Syria. These groups are not well-armed or well-funded. The FSA purchases their weapons locally on the black market, from arms dealers and smugglers who are profiting from the violence in Syria, while also sometimes purchasing weapons via smugglers from Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. They also capture weapons from security forces in attacks on regime arms depots.

The Local Coordination Committees (LCC) (discussed in the first part of this article) analyse the situation of the FSA in the following terms: "Our Revolution's fate has been left to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of defected regime soldiers and civilians carrying weapons in self-defence. This group lacks any sustained support, and lacks a unified command and control. At the same time, the FSA has remarkably and courageously defended unarmed civilians and their areas with their light weaponry and small munitions. Predictably, the regime's repressive military machine has been able to focus its oppression and anger on residents of those areas where the FSA has taken up positions, and engage in acts of reprisal that have doubled the numbers of victims and resulted in humanitarian crises and disaster-stricken areas in many parts of the country."

"Alternatively, the lack of definitive and organized support for the FSA has led to an absence of effective leadership in the military opposition. This has negatively affected the FSA's performance and could have disastrous consequences for the entire nation after independence from the current criminal regime. The existence of dispersed and scattered brigades with differing interests, loyalties, and courses of action, combined with the possibility of a flow of weapons from abroad, presents the risk of independent militias that will not focus on the national interest (best-case scenario); this could lead to action and communication with external forces that have conflicting agendas (worst-case scenario)."

The LCC and different groups such the Syrian revolutionary left have called for unification of the various armed groups in Syria under a civil authority towards which they would be accountable. The actions of the FSA should also be coordinated by local opposition groups, so that their needs will be met in protecting the demonstrators. The struggle of the Syrian people must not be transformed into in a violent clash with the militarized regime. Such a battle would give the upper hand to the regime.

The Syrian army is composed of about 295,000 active members. Some 175,000 of those are conscripts with varying levels of training and commitment. However, the army also includes a number of highly trained and capable units, including the Republican Guard Division and the 4th Mechanized Division, totaling between 25,000 and 35,000 in number. These units are under the command of Maher Assad, brother of Assad. Further, there are an additional 100,000 paramilitary forces linked directly to the ruling Baath Party. There is also the internal security apparatus which includes police forces linked to Syrian Military Intelligence, the National Security Bureau, the Political Security Directorate, Air Force Intelligence, and finally the General Intelligence Directorate. The latter division alone is comprised of about 25,000 men, and is directly linked to the highest levels of the government.

This is why we support the role of the FSA in an exclusively defensive and coordinated role with forces on the ground such as the LCC and other groups struggling against the regime, addressing the objectives of the Syrian revolution

Notwithstanding the need for a unified and accountable FSA, this should not detract from the project of building the revolutionary and popular movement, as stated by the LCC: "We must work with local leading activists to focus on continuing and improving their revolutionary activities and increasing their efficiency. The discourse on peaceful civil disobedience has not yet reached the majority and persuaded them of its effectiveness. Many methods of civilian resistance have yet to be used, or have been used only briefly."

Local groups and coordination committees are the effective and direct organizational format for the revolution. The political groups should support them and work on developing a clear and unified revolutionary strategy. From there we can build a revolutionary coalition bringing together the majority of dissidents.

Geopolitical interests

Syria is now the scene of a contest between the different regional and great powers, all of whom have put their own interests above those of the Syrian people. The US and its allies in the Gulf Arab countries, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, hope to hijack the revolution and take control of Arab revolutions. Western and Gulf countries aim to use Syria to weaken Iran, by undermining the alliance between Syria, Iran and Hezbollah. Russia, China and Iran support the Assad regime for their own geo-political interests, and fear that the US would increase their influence in a post-Assad Syria.

Statements from the NATO, the US and even the European Union have demonstrated a complete lack of will to launch a military offensive in Syria. The reality is that no one has interest in the fall of Assad regime, which has avoided direct confrontation with Israel for nearly four decades, while repressing radical and progressive parties and popular movements. At the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1976, the Syrian regime entered Lebanon to assist in repressing Palestinian and progressive forces and put an end to their revolution, coordinating their actions with fascist right-wing parties such as the Phalange.

Even the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the most vocal opponent to the Syrian regime these past months and the largest foreign investor in Syria before the beginning of the uprising, has declared recently by way of Foreign Minister al Faisal that "nobody is against the Syrian regime, but we are against what it is doing." There is a deliberate refusal to recognize popular opposition to the regime within Syria. On its side, Israel, by way of Ehud Barak, has asked Obama and the USA to ease the pressure on the Syrian regime.

One possible scenario envisioned by the different actors from allies to enemies of Assad is that of a political transition controlled by Gulf and Western countries exemplified by Yemen, which keeps the structure of the regime as it is while sacrificing the head of state. The only actor that would not be satisfied would be the Syrian people and their allies, many of whom are envisioning a truly revolutionary alternative.

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