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Syria

“There’s a fear that the fall of Assad would lead to worse for Western interests and Israel...”

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An interview with Gilbert Achcar by Aykut K?I?ç (with update)

Let me start with the different controversial opinions about the political character of the Syrian National Council (SNC). What’s your opinion on the composition of SNC?

The Syrian National Council is a heterogeneous combination of people, from the Muslim Brotherhood to people on the left, especially the People’s Democratic Party, with a number of figures linked to Western governments, the US or France in particular. It is basically heterogeneous, and we can see that, for instance, in the way they couldn’t agree on the replacement for Burhan Ghalioun or in the way Burhan Ghalioun himself was disavowed after signing the Cairo agreement with another faction of the opposition. The SNC is held together by the pressure of various states intervening in the Syrian situation. These states are actually pushing for a broader coalition to include other groups, in addition to those who are already in the SNC. They are aiming at some form of unification of the opposition, which would make it even more heterogeneous than what the SNC already is. This said, the important point is that the SNC is not a homogeneous rightwing force as depicted in some circles. Within the council, there are some people who cannot be classified as rightwing, but are rather progressives.

Recently, even rightwing papers supporting the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) government have published several news reports regarding the deepening divisions within the SNC and a possible escalation of opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood at the next meeting of “Friends of Syria” that will take place in Istanbul at the very beginning of April.

This meeting is meant by foreign powers including the Turkish government as a means of applying pressure towards the unification of the opposition ranks. I have not seen any sign of particular willingness to ostracize the Muslim Brotherhood. I don’t think there’s anything like that. Why would the Turkish government be hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood? They have been collaborating for a long time. Basically, the so-called Friends of Syria are annoyed by the image of division in the ranks of the Syrian opposition, which contrast with what there was in Libya. There you had the Transitional National Council with no other group challenging them as representing the Libyan opposition, whereas the Syrian opposition has been a cacophony with further splits among the various groups. Of course, this situation profits the Syrian regime and weakens the opposition. That’s what Turkey, the Western powers and Gulf Arab regimes are trying to deal with, trying to unify the opposition and bring forward a general image of it that would be reassuring to Western countries. The truth is that one of the major reasons for the skepticism and reluctance shown in practice by the Western countries towards the Syrian situation is the fear that the fall of Assad would lead to an outcome that would be worse for Western interests and Israel.

What is the possibility of a foreign intervention? How do you evaluate the Turkish government’s attitude in the Syrian situation?

“Intervention” is a very broad term and there is already a lot of ongoing intervention in various forms. If you mean

direct military intervention, I think that this is a very remote possibility for the moment. It is obvious that no one is contemplating to send troops on the ground to Syria, and there is no such request from the Syrian opposition, just as there had been none in the case of Libya. Moreover, Western powers are aware that a Libya type air campaign over Syria would be very costly, not only in material terms but also in human lives, of course. Such a campaign would lead to a very dangerous situation on the regional level as Syria is closely allied with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it is supported by Russia. Moreover, it has much stronger air defenses and military power than Libya had, and its population density is far higher. Considering all this, I don't think that there's a real possibility of any direct Western intervention. The most feasible kind of military interference in support of the opposition could take the form of the delivery of weapons, all the more that there is already an important military intervention in the form of weapons deliveries in support of the regime from Russia and Iran. However, sending weapons to the Syrian opposition can only be done through Turkey: Jordan would not take the risk of such an action since the Jordanian monarchy is too fragile for that; Iraq is not an option as the Iraqi government is closer to the Syrian regime and Iran; and Lebanon is not an option as a channel of official delivery of weapons to the Syrian opposition because of Hezbollah. Therefore, the only country that is strong enough to afford to be the channel for this delivery is Turkey. But the Turkish government is rejecting that for the time being. And that is why the Syrian opposition, in particular the Syrian Free Army, is having a hard time fighting back against the military offensive unleashed by the regime. They do not have enough and adequate weapons to fight back properly. Turkey is facing a dilemma in the Syrian situation. In the beginning, the Turkish government tried to play a mediating role and foster some kind of negotiated solution, but the Syrian regime would not listen. Erdoğan got frustrated and changed his attitude to open opposition to the Syrian regime. The Turkish government would not do anything without clear backing from the US and other Western countries. That is a further reason why they are not opening the way for weapons delivery since the Obama administration is openly against it. Basically, Washington is afraid of a Libyan style collapse of the regime that could turn Syria – like Libya now – into a chaotic country with the state being replaced by independent armed groups. They are afraid of an Iraqization of Syria looking like what Iraq became after the US invasion, especially that al-Qaeda is present and very active in the region. Israel also is quite worried and that is the main reason why they are showing very little enthusiasm for what is happening in Syria and no sympathy for the Syrian opposition.

After Kofi Annan’s visit to Damascus, how do you see the recent situation in Syria? Do you think that the Assad regime can still stay in power?

In the long run, I don't think that it is possible for this regime to survive, but how long it will cling to power, no one can tell. Assad believes that he can carry on this ruthless campaign with Russian and Iranian backing, while deterring a military intervention in support of the opposition. He probably plans some theatrical gesture co-opting selected members of the opposition after crushing the uprising. But he would need to do that from a position of strength, so that it does not appear as a concession imposed on him. This is why they are launching this offensive now. Until now it has been rather successful, since the other side lacks the means to counter it. On the other hand, it is very hard to imagine that the Syrian people, the popular opposition, would accept any outcome that does not rid them of the regime after the very heavy toll they have paid so far. So what is happening is that the regime forces invade this or that city, but then must move to other ones, and as soon as they withdraw the movement resumes in the city they left. Unless they commit three or four times more killing than they have done until now, unless they perpetrate a very massive massacre, I cannot see how this mass movement can be extinguished.

In Turkey – including among major sectors of the socialist left – there is huge confusion about the political composition of the opposition within Syria. How do you describe the Syrian opposition within the country?

The Syrian opposition within the country starts, of course, with the Local Coordination Committees (LCC). They are the most authentic representation of the uprising in the sense that they are its principal organizers. There are similar networks all over the region conducting the Arab upheaval. They are networks of people, mostly young, coordinating the mobilization, mostly using the Internet. It is only at a further stage that political opposition coalitions like the Syrian National Council were formed, in exile or within the country. Now, most of the movement inside the country accepted

the SNC as their representative because they were looking for someone to speak in their name abroad. The LCC is not a political leadership. In case of a regime collapse in the short or medium term, no one can tell which forces would be dominant politically in Syria. It is very difficult to assess this today precisely because this country has not had any form of free elections for several decades. Therefore, it is very difficult to know who represents what on the ground. But it is rather obvious that the organized political forces are only a tiny minority of the masses joining the Syrian uprising.

We know that in Syria there is a long tradition of left-wing politics? What is the influence of leftist groups and figures within the movement?

Contrary to Libya, there is indeed an important leftwing current and intelligentsia in Syria. There was no significant leftwing tradition before Gaddafi in Libya, and he ruled for over 40 years suppressing any form of political life except the one he himself orchestrated. Therefore, today it is rather difficult to find anything that may be called “left” in Libya, except for a very small number of people. In contrast, in Syria there is a long tradition of leftwing politics: Communists, Marxists of various shades, nationalists, etc. This is a country, where you have a large Palestinian population, among which the Palestinian left is well represented. The people holding leftist ideas – including Marxist ideas – in Syria represent a much more significant number than in most other surrounding Arab countries. It is therefore a reason for optimism. But the longer it takes for the Syrian regime to fall, the more it is creating the conditions for a sectarian turn of events and the more possible it is that the uprising will degenerate into sectarian conflict. This is a major worry for the future of the Syrian revolt.

The Turkish state’s greatest fear is the Kurdish question, of course. What is your opinion about the potential developments regarding the Kurdish question within the context of the Syrian revolt? Secondly, there are very strong signs of national unification among different Kurdish populations. Despite enormous state repression, the political self-confidence of the Kurdish movement in Turkey shows this very clearly.

We are witnessing a collapse and weakening of the two Arab regimes that oppress a significant fraction of the Kurdish people. These are Iraq and Syria. Naturally therefore, the Kurdish population in both countries has benefited from these developments. The weakening and later fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime allowed Iraqi Kurdistan to turn practically independent. It is part of the Iraqi state presently, but everyone knows very well that Iraqi Kurdistan is independent for all intents and purposes, connected with the rest of Iraq in a very loose federation. Syrian Kurdistan is also benefiting from the recent developments within the country. One of the first gestures that Bashar al-Assad did when the uprising began was to grant citizenship to sections of the Syrian Kurds, who had previously been deprived of citizenship rights. Syrian Kurdistan has been courted by both the regime and the opposition. Several Kurdish forces supported the opposition but they stress their own demands. They are adamant on getting a very clear expression of support for the national rights of the Kurds. Syrian Kurdistan has not yet really joined the uprising. There were some demonstrations at the beginning but until now it has not really taken part in the uprising. Basically, they are waiting to see in what direction the uprising will proceed. On the other hand, of course, the Turkish government’s support for the opposition is not seen with great enthusiasm by the Syrian Kurds. This may be a major reason for their wait-and-see stance.

Indeed, a most important reason for the Turkish government’s relatively cautious attitude vis-à-vis the Syrian revolt is that Iraqi Kurdistan is practically independent. The Turkish government is afraid of a chaotic situation in Syria that could lead to a similar result in Syrian Kurdistan. They might even imagine a connection being implemented between these two parts of Kurdistan, in Iraq and Syria. This would have very worrying consequences for the nationalist Turkish state and military.

What is the impact of the Syrian revolt on the sectarian political atmosphere in Lebanon? Secondly, how will these developments affect the Palestinian struggle after Hamas’s recent departure from Damascus?

What is happening in Syria sharpened very much the tensions between the two leading factions in Lebanon. The sectarian Shia-Sunni animosity increased a lot because the Syrian clash is seen in the region as one opposing Sunni to Shia – although the Alawites are not Shia strictly speaking, they are more or less seen as such, all the more that Iran is backing Syria. The Iran-Hezbollah axis goes through Iraq and Syria. Therefore, if ever there is a further degeneration into sectarian war in Syria, it might very well affect Lebanon and lead to the war spreading into Lebanon itself. For the time being, the two sides in Lebanon are holding back and watching what is happening in Syria.

As for the Palestinians, they don't have much to lose in Syria in either case. Hamas did not completely break with the Syrian regime. They know that if the Syrian regime were to survive, it would need anyhow to keep using the Palestinian card. That is why the regime itself did not sever its connections with Hamas. Now, if the regime falls and is replaced with a government in which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood holds a strong influence, Hamas would be quite happy as they belong to the same ideological and political family, as you know. Therefore, they would rather expect this to lead to an improvement in conditions for themselves. The truth is that the Syrian regime backed Hamas and some PLO opposition factions in the typical way of a mukhabarat regime, i.e. under very tight control from the regime's security services. The prospect of being able to work in Syria without this kind of control over their back is something that Hamas would very much appreciate.

How do you assess the mediation efforts by Kofi Annan and the UN?

Any effort aimed at finding a political outcome to the Syrian crisis that is both peaceful and democratic is welcome. The UN mediation has been accepted by all factions of the Syrian opposition, although most people are skeptical about the Syrian regime's true willingness to implement Kofi Annan's plan. The regime knows too well that if it were to actually withdraw its armed forces from the cities and stop its bloody repression, the popular mobilization against it will immediately reach new heights – similar to the huge popular rallies that took place in Hama last summer when the regime's forces refrained from attacking the demonstrations for a short while.

The United States government has just announced that it will supply communications equipment to the Syrian rebels, while various Arab nations will be paying their fighters. What do you think Washington is up to? Do you approve of these measures? Where do you see them leading?

All groups of the Syrian opposition agree on the right of self-defense of the Syrian uprising and praise the soldiers and officers who refuse to obey criminal orders and split from the armed forces. Even the National Coordination Committee, the main rival of the Syrian National Council, who are critical of the Free Syrian Army since they put main emphasis on the peaceful character of the uprising and on the search of a political settlement, acknowledged in their latest communiqué that the FSA is "one aspect of the Syrian revolution" and praised "the noble and courageous moral attitude of the Army's soldiers and officers who desert for humanistic, national and moral reasons."

Nevertheless, the US and its Western allies have repeatedly excluded not only their direct military intervention in the Syrian crisis, but any delivery of weapons as well. Whether Obama, Clinton or the French foreign minister Alain Juppé (in contrast with the French government's warmongering attitude on Libya), all of them have stated repeatedly that they oppose arms delivery to the Syrian opposition. This is despite the fact that the opposition has made pressing requests for such deliveries – initially the FSA alone, and now the SNC as well, and above all the grass-roots committees and popular demonstrations on the ground. This is not a surprise: remember that even in Libya, Western powers were conducting direct intervention through strikes from a distance, while opposing the delivery of weapons. The rationale was that they were afraid that weapons would fall into Islamic hands that were unfriendly to Western interests, including al-Qaeda. The truth is that they wanted to manage the civil war in Libya in order to impose their tutelage over it and a negotiated outcome suiting their interests, without giving the insurgents the means to speed up their fight against Gaddafi's regime and achieve full victory, as I explained in a long article last

August shortly before the liberation of Tripoli by the insurgents. Since the early days of the Western intervention in Libya, I had been arguing against the continuation of the bombing by NATO and its allies, while calling instead for arms deliveries to the insurgents, as they themselves were demanding.

In the Syrian case, Western worries are much more serious indeed: this is a country adjacent to Iraq, with a Sunni majority, whereas the Sunni minority in Iraq has been the constituency of the anti-US armed struggle. Al-Qaeda built an important network in Iraq, and is still fighting the Maliki government that was cosponsored by Washington and Iran. This is incidentally why Maliki is adamantly opposed to any arms deliveries to the Syrian opposition, and actually backs the Syrian regime.

Now, the Saudi kingdom is coming under pressure from its Sunni Wahhabi establishment to support the Syrian Sunnis against the heretic government that is massacring them: that is how the Saudis depict things, through sectarian eyes naturally. All criticisms pointing to the fact that the utterly undemocratic Saudi state is hypocritical in supporting a democratic insurgency are beside the point: the Saudis don't claim to be democrats, they are truly and plainly Sunni sectarians. As for Qatar, it wants to please its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood which it sponsors regionally, and who are exerting pressure for help to be sent to the Syrian uprising all the more that their Syrian branch is a major player there, as is the case with the Brotherhood and its satellites in Egypt and most other theaters of the Arab upheaval.

Now such statements of willingness to send weapons are inconsequential as long as there is no channel for that. As I explained already, Iraq is closer to the Syrian regime than to the uprising; in Lebanon, Hezbollah is a powerful deterrent; Jordan is unwilling to take the risk of seeing the Syrian regime retaliate in arming the kingdom's enemies; and Turkey likewise is worried that the Syrian regime would retaliate by arming the anti-Turkish Kurdish rebellion. So no neighboring state is willing to channel arms to the Syrian insurgents. The latter have to rely on the weapons they capture from the regime's armed forces on the one hand, and on those that they manage to buy from arms traffickers who are very active in this part of the world. But this means that they only get small weapons and tragically lack sufficient means to counter the massive firepower of the regime's forces.

Anyone who is truly not a supporter of Bashar al-Assad and opposes hypothetical arms deliveries to the Syrian insurgents “ in the name of an idealistic commitment to non-violence, for instance ” should focus their opposition on the very real and massive Russian and Iranian arms deliveries to the Syrian regime in order to remain consistent.

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