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Syria:

# Understanding the regime and the revolutionary process

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**The Syrian revolutionary process has since the beginning been met by circumspection by some on the left and even led some to separate it from the other uprising in the region, accusing it of being a conspiracy of Western imperialist and reactionary regional countries such as Saudi Arabia. This trend has unfortunately continued, despite the criminal actions of the regime. Others have limited their position to the refusal of any foreign military intervention, on which we agree, but refused to bring full support to the revolution, on which we disagree. Opposition to foreign military intervention in Syria is not enough. Such a position is meaningless if not accompanied by clear and strong support for the Syrian people's movement.**

These positions all show a lack of analysis and understanding, firstly, of the policies and the nature of the regime and, secondly, of the dynamics of the uprising.

## Nature of the regime

Three main groups have been at the core of the support of the regime: the high military and security establishment, the bourgeoisie and the high religious establishments of all sects.

The High military establishment has accumulated profits since the arrival to power of Hafez Al Assad in 1970 that encouraged massive corruption of the military and government officials in exchange for total loyalty to his person. The states through this generalised corruption became a real cash machine for the nomenklatura and in particular for the inner circle of the dictator, his family and his most loyal lieutenants.

This new "class" organically linked to the state needed to invest its wealth in the various sectors of the economy. Decree No. 10 of 1991 was the springboard by which this class could "launder" their wealth. It allowed investment in the private sector and has opened up import-export opportunities but is still under state control, enriching each of them and continuing the system of generalized corruption. The 1990s saw the emergence of this "new class" or nouveau riche/bourgeois class hybrid resulting from a merger of the bureaucracy and the survivors of the old bourgeoisie, the "private bourgeoisie."

The regime bourgeois credentials were accelerated with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies with Bashar Al Assad's arrival to power in 2000. These policies especially benefited a small oligarchy and a few of its clients. Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, represented the mafia-style process of privatization led by the regime.

A process of privatization created new monopolies in the hands of relatives of Bashar al-Assad, while the quality of goods and services declined. These neoliberal economic reforms allowed the appropriation of economic power for the benefit of the rich and powerful. The process of privatization of public companies has been made for the benefit of few individuals close to the regime. At the same time the financial sector has developed inside the establishment of private banks, insurance firms, the Damascus stock exchange and money exchange bureaus.

Neoliberal policies undertaken by the regime have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, especially from the Arab Gulf, by liberalizing the Syrian economy for their benefits and at the expense of the far majority of Syrians hit by

inflation and the rising cost of living. In addition to that, Syria's agricultural and public sector were also declining and no effective strategy to strengthen them have been suggested yet, which could jeopardize the country's alimentary autonomy and harm the population by the constant rise in prices of food and non-food basic needs.

The last important base of support for the Syrian regime is the high religious establishment of all sects, which has benefited the regime for the past twenty years and supported it since the beginning of the revolution. The Syrian regime and its security services established political and economic links with the religious establishment, especially from the Sunni community following the repression of the 1980s. The high religious establishments of all the sects have increasingly been presented by the regime as actors of the "Syrian civil society" in the past as soon as a foreign delegation would visit the country.

The State's behavior these past years has been in total contradiction with the official picture of a secular country. A religious vocabulary appeared more often in political discourse, along with a massive increase in the building of religious sites from the eighties until now. These government measures were also accompanied by censorship of literary and artistic works, while promoting a religious literature filling more and more the shelves of libraries and Islamizing the field of higher education. This is true particularly in the humanities and expressed itself in the rather systematic referral to religious references of any scientific, social and cultural phenomenon. Around 10,000 mosques and hundreds of religious schools were built. More than 200 conferences headed by clerics were held in cultural centres of important towns during 2007.

In the same time, the regime has fostered sectarian division. It built the army according to sectarian criteria to maintain loyalty. While the majority of the conscript soldiers are Sunni according to their population share, the officers' corps is predominately Alawis.

Nevertheless, this regime is above all a clientelist regime, which finds support – alongside the security service apparatus – among the predominantly Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie in Aleppo and Damascus, which benefited from the neoliberal policies of recent years. The regime has built a network of loyalties through various ties, mainly economic, with individuals from different communities as we have seen above.

Anti-imperialist regime challenging Israel and the West?

Syria has been able to portray itself as an anti-imperialist state by its support of the resistance in Lebanon and in Palestine for many years now, and has taken very strong rhetorical positions in opposition to Israel. But this position is not based on anti-imperialist principles, but on conjectural national interests. These are guided by the necessity to ensure the security and continuity of the regime as well as a balance of power in diplomatic negotiations with Israel to recover the Golan Heights area seized in 1967.

The regime has actually collaborated with Western imperialist governments on many occasions. It is that same regime that refused to assist the Palestinians and progressive Jordanian groups to overthrow the conservative Hashemite regime in Jordan during the popular uprising in 1970, known as the Black September. This is the same regime which crushed the Palestinians and the progressive movements in Lebanon in 1976 with the tacit acceptance of the West, putting an end to their revolution, while participating in the imperialist war against Iraq in 1991 with the coalition led by the US. They have also participated in the War on terror launched by President George W. Bush by collaborating on security issues. Israel has actually several times called on the US to ease the pressure on the Syrian regime which has not shot a single bullet for the occupied Golan Heights since 1973.

Syria has not responded to direct attacks on its soil widely attributed to Israel, including a 2007 air strike on a suspected nuclear reactor or the assassination of a top Lebanese leader Imad Moghniye, the following year. It also

has engaged in multiple rounds of peace talks, most recently in 2008. Although these talks have not yielded an agreement, their repeated failure has led to nothing worse than a continued chill.

Syrian officials have repeatedly declared their readiness to sign a peace agreement with Israel as soon as the occupation of the Golan Heights would end, while nothing was said on the Palestinian issue.

Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar Al Assad, actually declared in June 2011 that if there is no stability in Syria, there will be no stability in Israel, and adding that no one can guarantee what will occur if something happens to the Syrian regime. As a result, we can understand Israel's satisfaction with the status quo under the current the Syrian regime.

The Palestinian refugees of Syria fully aware of all this has increasingly been participating in the revolution alongside their Syrian brothers and sisters. They have suffered from the regime's repression, with more than 40 martyrs and hundreds arrested by security forces. Actions of support from the Palestine occupied territories and '48 territories (Israel) to the Syrian revolution have multiplied these past few months.

## The popular movement

The geography of the uprisings in Idlib and Deraa as well as other rural areas, including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, show the massive involvement of the downtrodden in this revolution.

The bulk of the protesters of the Syrian revolutionary movement actually include the economically disenfranchised rural and urban working and middle classes who have suffered from the accelerated imposition of neoliberal policies by Bashar Al Assad since his arrival to power. Successful campaigns of general strikes and civil disobedience in Syria during the period December 2011 that paralyzed large parts of the country showed notably the activism of the working class and exploited who are indeed the heart of the Syrian revolution. This is why the dictatorship has laid off more than 85,000 workers from January 2011 to February 2012, and closed 187 factories (according to official figures).

The degradation of living standards of the majority of Syrians, coupled with political repression, actually led to visible protests since 2006. In May 2006, hundreds of workers of the Public Building Company in Damascus held a demonstration that erupted in clashes with security forces. In Homs, clashes broke out between the police and demonstrators protesting against the demolition of homes occupied by poor people. Data from 2007 shows that people living in extreme poverty, defined as those unable to obtain their basic food and non-food needs, rose to 2 million. About 62% of the people living in poverty are from rural areas and live in food insecurity or are vulnerable.

In 2007, several clashes between the police and demonstrators took place in different areas in Syria such as the al-Moussrania district of Aleppo, al-Mazra in Homs, and Alroudha in Damascus. In 2008, demonstrations were held by workers in the port of Latakia, and Dhabia and Zabadani near Damascus. In 2009 and 2010, the regime also faced protests, until the beginning of revolution this year. Wealth gaps and inequality had continuously increased these last few years.

Prior the revolution, the percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from 11% in 2000 to 33% in 2010. That is to say, about 7 million Syrians live around the poverty line. The unemployment rate was actually constantly rising and there were up to 20 to 25% unemployment in society, reaching up to 55% for people under 25 in a country where young people under 30 exceed 65% of the total population. The labour market was unable to absorb the

380,000 people who swell the ranks of job-seekers every year, while the government promised the creation of 250,000 jobs every year in the tenth year plan, which besides it was not able to realize. In addition to this, a new labour act in Syria has been adopted in April 2010 and is clearly favoring employers against employees.

The supporters of the Syrian regime and the left refusing to support the Syrian revolution therefore consider that the downtrodden and the exploited of Syria, who are the bulk of the Syrian popular movement, are just simple instrument of Saudi and US imperialist policies. At the same time they are defending or not taking a position against a regime collaborating with Western Imperialism and protective of Israel, which is pursuing neoliberal policies for the interests of a small economic elite that is far from being secular but actually draws its support from the corrupt high religious establishment.

## Conclusion

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman was right to say that post-revolution Egypt is a larger threat to Israel than Iran, and this can also be applied to Syria. A free, progressive, democratic and truly independent Egypt and Syria are infinitely more dangerous to the Zionist apartheid state and its occupied territories than the repressive Syrian and Islamic Republic.

The Syrian revolution is part of the revolutionary process taking place in the Arab world, and should not be separated. The Syrian people are struggling like Egyptians, Tunisians, Bahrainis and other democrats, socialists and anti-imperialists in the region.

The Syrian people are the true revolutionaries and anti-imperialists, and not the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. It is the Syrian population who welcomed Palestinians, Lebanese and Iraqi refugees when they were attacked and occupied by the imperialist powers such as Israel and the US. The victory of the Syrian revolution will open a new resistance front against the imperialist powers, while its defeat will strengthen them. Long live the Syrian revolution.

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