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Syria

Activist, Democratic Movements Still Have A Chance In Syria

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The ongoing Syrian Civil War has left more than 400,000 dead, displaced more than 12 million and shifted the power in the Middle East.

What began with pro-democratic protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has led to the rise of the Islamic State and the Al-Nusra Front. The war has also fueled movements like Hezbollah and bolstered the foreign interventionist interests of Iran, Israel and Russia.

While the war in Syria might soon be over, activist Joseph Daher said pro-democratic revolutionary movements still have a chance. Daher teaches in the Institute for Political, Historical and International Studies at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. He's founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever, and author of the new book "Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God."

Daher joined Worldview's Jerome McDonnell to discuss the war in Syria.

Jerome McDonnell: Since the war began, we haven't heard much about the democratic council movement in Syria. What can you tell me about them?

Joseph Daher: The democratic movement has been the main target since the beginning of the uprising. It's the biggest threat to the Assad regime. The best enemy for the Assad regime – internally or in winning over foreign countries – is a group like ISIS. At the beginning of the uprising, the Assad regime liberated the worst jihadist personalities from its prisons. That's what established the Islamic fundamentalist forces in Syria and played a big part in crushing the movement's democratic components.

The so-called "Friends of Syria," like Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, supported the Assad regime to "sectarianize" the revolution. The Gulf monarchies were scared to see a successful democratic revolution in Syria that could serve as an example for their own citizens during the Arab Spring in 2011. Unfortunately, the Syrian people have been left alone. Regional and international interests have been the enemy of the Syrian people and their Democratic aspirations.

McDonnell: Obama's policy was to slowly "roll back" ISIS, but Donald Trump is focusing on "pounding ISIS." What effect will that have on Syria?

Daher: When it comes to ISIS and similar organizations, it's necessary to tackle their root causes: authoritarian regimes and international and regional foreign interventions. In Assad's prisons in Syria, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's prisons in Egypt, and in the prisons of other authoritarian regimes, you create future radical militant groups. Who would've thought you could have had something worse than Al-Qaeda? The creation of ISIS in 2013 rose out of the suppression of mass movements by authoritarian regimes.

McDonnell: What is the role of Hezbollah in the Syria conflict?

Daher: Just as the Assad regime would not have been able to survive until today with out the support of Iran and

Russia, Hezbollah has been intervening in Syria since the end of 2011. Hezbollah notably participated in the conquest of Eastern Aleppo last December, playing a leading role on the side of the Assad regime. Therefore, their role has been destructive and criminal by assisting the Assad regime.

McDonnell: How does Hezbollah avoid appearing as a puppet of Iran?

Daher: When Hezbollah intervened at the end of 2011, you didn't have the massive Islamic fundamentalist groups like today. They say they're only there to protect against sectarianism and the interests of Lebanon. Meanwhile, they say they're intervening in Syria to save the project of resistance against Israel. Hezbollah and Iran say, for example, that the liberation of Palestine goes through Aleppo. That's incredible knowing the Assad regime's violent history against the Palestinian people.

McDonnell: Wouldn't the Assad regime stand without the support of Iran or Russia?

Daher: The Syrian army hasn't been on the battlefield since 2015. It has not led one single military confrontation. Most of the Syrian military, which has gone down from 300,000 to 80,000 is mostly based in cities to control population and checkpoints. There's around 150,000 protegee militias in Syria. Meanwhile, institutions in Assad's Syria have been crumbling. It's only been through the financial help of Russia and Iran that they've sustained. But that's creating huge tensions within the Assad regime where the political economy of Iran and Russia within Syria take precedent.

McDonnell: How do we map out a future democratic Syria?

Daher: The international scene " especially following Trump's election in the U.S. " is just legitimizing a criminal regime. There's a general consensus to put an end to the uprising in Syria, and likewise to its democratic aspirations. Maintaining the regime is seen as a way of fighting against ISIS and al-Nusra. So, unfortunately, peace is not looking very close. We cannot have peace with this criminal regime continuing to eliminate anything or anyone opposing it.

McDonnell: What went wrong with the Arab Spring?

Daher: The biggest issue is that there was no capacity to build an independent democratic coalition from what I call the two sides of the counter-revolution " the old regimes and Islamic fundamentalists forces. Unfortunately, democrats and progressives try to join one side or the other instead of building a third coalition that could be more positive and democratic. But, you know, six years after the French Revolution, the situation was not very good either. So even though we're witnessing very harsh conditions now, we're very far from finished.

[Posted on February 24, 2017 on Syria Freedom Forever.](#)

The transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity. Listen to the full interview on this [link](#).)

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