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Syria

"Our Destinies are Linked": Joseph Daher on the Syrian Revolution

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As the Syrian revolution entered its eighth year this march, Dan Fischer and S. Maja sent some questions to Joseph Daher. We discussed how the destiny of Syria's popular struggle against Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship is linked to anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist struggles globally, including in Rojava, Palestine, Europe, and North America.

Do the policies and actions of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship approach fascism? Why are authoritarians and far-rightists around the world supporting the Assad regime, and to what extent are Assad's massacres in Ghouta and elsewhere an inspiration for them?

The Assad despotic regime definitely has fascistic trends, demonstrated by its refusal of any kind of opposition and the violence it has committed. Regarding the nature of the Assad regime, I would argue it is a despotic, capitalist and patrimonial state ruling through violent repression and using various policies such as sectarianism, tribalism, conservatism, and racism to dominate society and mobilize a cross-class popular base linked through sectarian, regional, tribal and clientelist connections to defend the regime on a reactionary basis.

The patrimonial nature of the state means the centers of power (political, military and economic) within the regime are concentrated in one family and its clique, similar to Libya and the Gulf monarchies for example, therefore pushing the regime to use all the violence at its disposal to protect its rule.

It is therefore very far from being socialist, anti-imperialist and secular as presented by some among sectors of the western left, often ignorant of Syria.

Many fascist and fascistic parties and personalities support Assad's regime throughout the world, including Italy's far-right Forza Nuova and CasaPound, Greece's neo-fascist Golden Dawn, the UK's British National Party (BNP), and Poland's ultranationalist National Rebirth, among others. These are part of an international front that has rallied on behalf of Bashar al-Assad and sent solidarity delegations to Syria since the beginning of the uprising. One example is European Solidarity Front for Syria (ESFS) - a coalition of neo-fascist and far-right groups that support Assad's regime. More recently in March, seven members of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) visited Damascus.

You can find other far-right personalities supporting Assad as well, including Nick Griffin, formerly of the British National Party; American white supremacist Richard Spencer, etc.

There are different reasons that might be in contradiction sometimes, but you can find notably:

- Authoritarianism
- Islamophobia: Assad is seen as a "bulwark" against Islam and Sunni Islamic fundamentalism
- Anti-USA position, not to be confused with anti-imperialism, because they have no problem with Russian imperialism
- Anti-Semitism, which in this case includes an opposition to Israel

Links actually existed with different fascist and fascistic movements even before the uprising. For example, in 2005, David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and notorious Holocaust denier, delivered a speech in Damascus on state television.

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On your last question, what is sure is that the impunity given to the continuous murderous crimes of Assad's despotic regime in Ghouta and elsewhere with the assistance and/or complicity of international imperialist powers encourages other dictators and authoritarian regimes to repress violently their own people. This participates as well in a global international trend of authoritarianism present throughout the world, including among liberal democracies in the Western countries, with the advancement and deepening of neo-liberalism.

What is your response to those who say that the Syrian opposition to Assad is comprised mainly of Jihadis? What are the politics of left and democratic currents within the Syrian Revolution?

We should remember first that the Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad regime. They sustained the popular uprising for numerous years by organizing and documenting protests and acts of civil disobedience, and by motivating people to join protests. The earliest manifestations of the "coordinating committees" (or tansiqiyat) were neighborhood gatherings throughout Syria. The regime specifically targeted these networks of activists, who had initiated demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and campaigns in favor of countrywide strikes. The regime killed, imprisoned, kidnapped and pushed to exile these activists.

Tragically throughout the year, each defeat of the democratic resistance strengthened and benefited the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces on the ground. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements and their dominations on the military scene in some regions has been negative for the revolution, as they opposed its objectives (democracy, social justice and equality). With their sectarian and reactionary discourses and behaviors, these movements not only acted as a repellent for the vast majority of religious and ethnic minorities, and women, but also to sections of Arab Sunni populations in some liberated areas where we have seen demonstrations against them, especially among large sections of the middle class in Damascus and Aleppo. They attacked and continue to attack the democratic activists, while they often tried to impose their authority on the institutions developed by locals, often bringing resistance from local populations against their authoritarian behaviors.

Nobody denies that we are no longer in March 2011 and that the situation of democratic and progressive forces is very weak today in Syria. Revolutionary processes are long-term events, characterized by higher and lower level mobilizations according to the context. They are even characterized by some periods of defeat, but it's hard to say when they end. This is especially the case in Syria, when the conditions that allowed for the beginning of these uprisings are still present, while the regime is very far from finding ways to solve them.

The other element that could also play a role in shaping future events is the large documentation of the uprising that has never been seen before in history. There has been significant recording, testimonies and documentation of the protest movement, the actors involved and the modes of actions. In the seventies, Syria witnessed strong popular and democratic resistance with significant strikes and demonstrations throughout the country with mass followings. Unfortunately, this memory was not kept and was not well-known by the new generation of protesters in the country in 2011. The Syrian revolutionary process that started in 2011 is one of the most documented. This memory will remain and could inspire and inform future resistance. The political experiences that have been accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not disappear.

Regarding the expansion of ISIS and other extremist jihadi forces, some people argue that we must "choose a camp," between Assad's regime and jihadist forces in order to find a concrete solution to the conflict. In effect, this means we must throw our support behind Assad and his allied Iranian and Russian forces. Sadly, baseless discourse like this became particularly prominent after terrorist attacks by ISIS in different countries in the world. After these attacks, many in the West began advocating for a "global war against ISIS." Those on the left and right alike argued for the need to collaborate with the Assad regime, or at least seek a solution in which the Assad dynasty remains in control of the country.

Those, like myself, who oppose this outlook are charged with being idealistic. Our critics tell us we must take "more realistic" approaches toward Syria, in order to save lives. What these individuals fail to appreciate, however, is that it is not enough to defeat ISIS, jihadist forces and other Salafist organizations. Brute military force alone only ensures that other militant groups will take its place, as al-Qaida in Iraq demonstrates. Real solutions to the crisis in Syria and elsewhere in the region must address the socio-economic and political conditions that have enabled the growth of ISIS and other extremist organizations.

We have to understand that ISIS's expansion is a fundamental element of the counter-revolution in the Middle East that emerged as the result of authoritarian regimes crushing popular movements linked to the 2011 Arab Spring. The interventions of regional and international states have contributed to ISIS's development as well. Finally, neo-liberal policies that have impoverished the popular class, together with the repression of democratic and trade union forces, have been key in helping ISIS and Islamic fundamentalist forces grow.

The left must understand that only by ridding the region of the conditions that allowed ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups to develop can we resolve the crisis. At the same time, empowering those progressive and democratic forces on the ground who are fighting to overthrow despotic regimes and face reactionary groups is part and parcel of this approach. Clearly, no peaceful and just solution in Syria can be reached with Bashar al-Assad and his clique in power. He is the biggest criminal in Syria and must be prosecuted for his crimes instead of being legitimized by international and regional powers.

What impact did the anarchist economist Omar Aziz have on the Syrian Revolution, particularly on the establishment of self-governing local councils? In 2016, Leila Al-Shami cited an estimate that there were 395 local councils across Syria. What has happened with the councils since then?

Omar Aziz, a 63-year-old anarchist activist who was arrested in October 2012 and died under torture in a regime jail in February 2013, was the first to call for the establishment of "local councils" in October 2011. Certainly in Damascus and its province his ideas and call for self-governing councils was important and inspirational for many activists. However, this was also the result of the reality of the ground. After the regime's forces withdrew from some regions, people had to organize society politically and to coordinate between civilians and armed opposition groups.

The number of local councils has diminished considerably after the fall of Eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and because of the military advances of pro-regime forces capturing opposition held territories, and also as a result of the attacks of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist armed groups that replaced civilians councils with their own.

Regarding local councils that played an important role in the opposition held areas, we must be clear that their very important experiences did not mean that there were no shortcomings, such as the lack of representation of women, or of religious minorities in general. Other problems existed as well such as some forms of disorganization, undemocratic practices, over-representation of some influential families in some areas, etc. Civil councils were also not always completely autonomous from military groups, relying often on military groups for resources. While numerous council members were generally elected, nearly half of them, there were also a number of councils undemocratically appointed rather than elected, based on the influence of local military leaders, clan and family structures, and elders. Another problem that was encountered in the selection of the council's representatives was the need for particular professional and technical skills.

Despite these limitations, local councils were able to restore a minimum level of social services in their regions and enjoyed some level of legitimacy.

In your article "The Kurdish Crisis in Iraq and Syria" you argue that "we should not isolate the struggle for

self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution." [1] What suggestions do you have for people who support both the Syrian revolution and the Rojava revolution despite the clashes between elements of these two struggles?

We should not separate their destinies firstly, and we should oppose the various military attacks on Afrin, Idlib and Eastern Ghouta and support all the civilians in Syria.

More broadly, the Afrin operation reflects the weakness of all democratic and progressive actors in Syria in the face of the Assad regime and its allies' destruction of the Syrian revolution, and the consequent renewed power of this regime, which has received acceptance by all international actors.

What is desperately needed is solidarity between all revolutionaries (Arabs, Kurds and all other ethnic minorities) who are against the Assad regime and all the regional and international imperialist powers and support the struggles for social justice, women's rights and the rights of oppressed minorities.

In general, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper "people" or "nation" in Syria and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere. This does not, however, justify being uncritical of any negative PYD policies (or any other Kurdish political party).

We can see that defeat of the Syrian uprising would probably mark the end of the Rojava experience and the return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of Syria. The Assad regime and the reactionary forces, which now dominate much of the scene in Syria would not allow any possible development of a political experience that is at odds with their authoritarianism.

We should oppose also all forms of sectarianism and racism. Our slogan should be "Our destinies are linked." More generally we have to link once again the uprising in Syria to the uprisings in the region in other countries. Like this, we can see the links in our struggles and that each defeat of people in struggles for more democracy and social justice is a defeat for all. Despotic and authoritarian regimes learn from their experiences in repression and share them with their allies. This is a reality, and this is why we need more collaborations between progressive forces throughout the region.

What is the effect of Turkey's invasion of Afrin on the Syrian and Rojava revolutions?

It is catastrophic in humanitarian aspect of course, but also politically.

So in mid-March 2018, as a reminder, the Turkish army and its Syrian proxies took over the city of Afrin, following the withdrawal of YPG forces of the city. Following the conquest and occupation of the city, fighters of the Syrian opposition armed groups linked to Ankara plundered and looted civilian residences and shops, while they tore down a statue of Kawa, a central and symbolic figure in a Kurdish legend about the new year celebration of Newroz. Nearly 100,000 people also fled their homes after the invasion of Afrin. This is not to forget that during the military campaign against Afrin, they also attacked civilians and mutilated the corpses of Kurdish YPG and YPJ soldiers and displayed it on social media, notably of a member of the Kurdish Women's Protection Units, fueling ethnic tensions. Tensions were heightened, and ethnic divisions were deepened between Arabs and Kurds.

Opposition activists have to be clear in their opposition to the Syrian Coalition. The Syrian Coalition, composed mainly of liberal, Islamic and conservative personalities and groups, not only supported Turkish military intervention

and continued its chauvinistic and racist policies against the Kurds in Syria, but also participated in this operation by calling Syrian refugees in Turkey to join the Syrian armed opposition groups fighting in Afrin. They have called for Turkish military intervention for a long time and have encouraged Arab chauvinism and racism against the Kurds, while even justifying and supporting the presence of Islamic fundamentalist movements. The Syrian fighters in Ankara have multiplied racist speeches against Kurds since the beginning of the military operation.

Turkey is also using this military intervention to serve internal objectives by crushing the Kurdish issue and satisfying the Turkish far right and extreme nationalists. In addition to this, and as I had mentioned on numerous occasions in the past, as the fight against Daesh is nearly completed, the USA has announced its willingness to withdraw its forces from Syria, which would leave the opportunity for Turkey to intervene militarily, just as in Afrin, in the northeastern areas of the country controlled by PYD, without opposition from the USA. Erdogan has actually declared that Turkish forces will press their offensive against Kurdish YPG fighters along the length of Turkey's border with Syria and if necessary into northern Iraq.

How should the internationalist left respond to calls from some Syrians and Kurds for assistance from the United States military?

There is definitely no easy answer, especially when people are getting massacred on one side and, on the other, the USA has no willingness of any regime change in Syria, as has been the case since the beginning of the uprising, or, as we saw, to stop the Turkish intervention against the Kurds in Afrin.

Today the main issue is really demanding the end of the war, an end to all military interventions and guaranteeing rights for the civilians. I expanded on this issue in the last question.

However, while disagreeing with groups demanding military interventions, we should still maintain our solidarity with all the democratic and progressive forces in Syria as well as the Kurdish socialist and democratic forces that resist against the two actors of the counter revolution: the Assad regime on one side and the jihadist and Islamic reactionary forces on the other side.

From this perspective, what we can argue is that it is necessary to defend a local dynamic of self-defense rather than increasing the stranglehold of imperialism, and therefore we should also support the provision of weapons and arms to these democratic forces in the region to combat both counter-revolutionary forces. These are important element that could empower the democratic and progressive forces on the ground and give them the tools to defend themselves.

For the people who don't feel at ease with the fact of demanding arms and weapons with no political conditions and strings attached from the West, I would like to invite them to read Trotsky's "Learn to Think." [\[2\]](#)

This does not mean of course that we are uncritical of the leadership of these groups that have such demands, and we should maintain our independence and critical opinions, even when dealing with them.

We have to be clear that imperialist actors and regional powers all act according to an imperialist logic that maintains authoritarian and unjust systems. They all oppose the self-determination of the peoples of the region and their struggles for emancipation. Hence, anti-war activists whether in the Middle East or the West need to address all forms of repression and authoritarianism, and condemn all forms of foreign intervention against the interests of the people of the region.

What is Israel's role in the conflict and view on regime change? How do you respond to those who say Assad's regime is a champion of Palestine?

Unwilling to see any radical change at its borders, Israel favored a similar option in Syria to the USA's. The main priorities of the Israeli state were firstly to prevent the civil war in Syria from spreading across its borders and secondly to prevent chemical weapons from falling into the hands of extremist Islamic groups or the transfer of significant arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In September 2017, former Israeli air force chief Amir Eshel declared Israel had hit arms convoys of the Syrian military and its Hezbollah allies nearly 100 times since the beginning of 2012. Assad's regime, unwilling to provoke Israel, never responded to these interventions, except in February 2018 when an anti-aircraft fire downed an Israeli warplane returning from a bombing raid on Iran-backed positions in Syria. Israel then launched a second and more intensive air raid, hitting what it stated were 12 Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria, including Syrian air defense systems. Following this confrontation, both Israel and Syria signaled they were not seeking wider conflict, while Russia and the USA were concerned about any more violent escalation.

Israeli authorities also publicly stated their opposition to seeing any Iranian or Hezbollah troops close to its borders and called on Russia to prevent this from happening. In this context, Israel multiplied attacks, especially from 2017, against Hezbollah and pro-Iranian targets in Syria.

As a possible gesture to appease the apprehensions of the Israeli state, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stressed at the end of February 2018 that his country's presence in Syria at the invitation of Damascus was not aimed at creating a new front against Israel, but at combating terrorism. The main issue today for Israel is therefore the presence of Iran and Hezbollah close to its borders in Syria.

Regarding the second question, this is one of the biggest lies of the Syrian regime. Actually the final break in 1970 between Salah Jadid, de facto leader of Syria at the time, and Hafez al-Assad, who was Minister of Defense and head of the Air force, occurred following the refusal of Hafez al-Assad to support the government decision to allow the Palestinian Liberation Army (under command of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)) to intervene in Jordan during the war in 1970 between the Palestinian resistance and King Hussayn's army. This led to the bloody Black September with thousands Palestinians killed. The Ba'th party led by Jadid started a process to expel Assad from his positions of power, in order to dominate the army more firmly. The decision was never implemented. The army took control over the party headquarters, on the orders of Hafez al-Assad and Mustafa Tlass. This new bloody coup led to complete control of the party and of the regime by Assad.

As for anti-imperialism: the Assad regime has a history of collaboration with various imperialist forces. Assad's regime forces entered Lebanon in 1976 to crush Palestinian and Lebanese leftist forces with the support and approval of the United States and Israel. Throughout the eighties you had the war of the camps between mostly Amal and Palestinian groups, and Syria was supporting Amal against the Palestinian groups and crushing them.

Less known, following 1982 and the crushing of Palestinian groups in Lebanon by the Syrian regime, Yarmouk camp, which is a neighborhood of Palestinians in Damascus, witnessed a couple of uprisings or protest movements on a massive level within Damascus. There was massive repression by the Syrian secretive services against them, with more than a 1,000 political prisoners throughout the eighties in Assad's prisons.

In 1991, Syria supported the US led intervention against Iraq. From 1974 until 2011, not a single bullet was shot from Syria to liberate the occupied Golan. Assad was always ready to enter into a peace agreement with Israel if Israel gave back at least a section of the occupied Golan but Israel never wanted that. It wasn't the opposite and it's very important to understand this. Until this day they see Assad as the lesser evil, as the best guarantee for their own borders. So this is why they are happy with a weakened dictatorship in Syria, as opposed to regime change. Israel fears various uprisings in the region, because authoritarian regimes had interest to, directly or indirectly, collaborate

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with Israel and crush their own people along with the Palestinians. The best example was a statement made by Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2011, when he declared that the biggest threat to Israel is a successful Egyptian revolution, an Egyptian democracy, and not Iran. Because this revolution could be extended to the region, and people liberating themselves will turn towards the Palestinian cause that has been a central cause for decades in the region. So no, definitely the Assad regime is very far from being an ally of the Palestinian people or of any of the peoples struggling for freedom and dignity.

Since 2011, there has been massive repression against Palestinians refugees in Syria. Syria's Yarmouk camp suffered a horrible siege with hundreds of people dying of hunger etc. In the first week of the uprising Bouthaina Shaaban, the advisor of the Syrian regime, accused the Palestinians of fomenting sectarian strives within Syria, especially in Latakia etc. Several Palestinian refugee camps have been bombed. Today there's more than 20,000 Palestinians wanted by the Assad regime.

I believe that the liberation of the popular classes of the region and of Palestine are linked. The liberation of Palestine and its popular classes is linked to the liberation and emancipation of the popular classes in the region against their ruling classes and the various imperialists, particularly the USA and Russia, and regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. In this similar logic we have to fight against all attempts by regimes and Islamic reactionary forces to divide the popular classes according to their gender, religious sects, nationalities, etc. in an attempt to rule them and therefore prevent their liberation and the Palestinian popular classes' liberation as well.

What are some direct actions that anti-fascists and anti-authoritarians can take in solidarity with the Syrian people, including those being massacred in Ghouta, Idlib, and Afrin?

Multiple things should be done. I think anti-fascists and anti-authoritarians should call for an end to the war, which has created terrible suffering. It has led to massive displacement of people within the country and driven millions out of it as refugees. The war only benefits the counterrevolutionary forces on all sides. From both a political and humanitarian perspective, the end of the war in Syria is an absolute necessity.

Likewise, we must reject all the attempts to legitimize Assad's regime, and we must oppose all agreements that enable it to play any role in the country's future. A blank check given to Assad today will encourage future attempts by other despotic and authoritarian states to crush their populations if they come to revolt.

We have to guarantee as well the rights of civilians within Syria, particularly preventing more forced displacements and securing the rights of refugees (right of return, right for financial compensations in case of destruction of their houses, justice for the losses of their relatives, etc.).

Assad and his various partners in the regime must be held accountable for their crimes. The same goes for the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces and other armed groups.

We need to support the democratic and progressive actors and movements against both sides of the counterrevolution: the regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents. We have to build a united front based on the initial objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice, and equality, saying no to sectarianism and no to racism.

We of course need to oppose all imperialist and authoritarian actors intervening in Syria.

In their own countries, the left internationally should also struggle

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- for the opening of borders for migrants and refugees and against building walls or transforming Europe for example into a fortress that would turn the Mediterranean Sea into a cemetery of migrants
- against all forms of Islamophobia and racism
- against all cooperation of Western states with despotic regimes and the Apartheid, colonial and racist state of Israel (in this latter case, support BDS campaigns)
- against more "security" and anti-democratic policies promoted in the name of "the war against terrorism."

April 6, 2018

["Its Going Down"](#)

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[1] see <http://newsocialist.org/the-kurdish-crisis-in-iraq-and-syria/> <http://newsocialist.org/the-kurdish...>

[2] Marxist.org <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tr...>