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Syria

Inside the Syrian Revolution and what the Left must do

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Dr. Yasser Munif, professor at Emerson College, has recently visited Syria, witnessed the revolution there, and spoken and written about it (including an interview with scholar Nigel Gibson at Jadaliyya.) He talks about what he saw, the troubles facing revolutionaries in Syria, the very oppositional distinction between revolutionaries and jihadists, and more. And he talked about the Left's perception of what's going on, and how so many are getting it wrong on Syria.

Yasser Munif: This summer I actually spent two months in Syria, in northern Syria, the liberated area, and it was a very humbling experience. I learned a lot and I saw a popular revolution, an ongoing popular revolution. People are rebuilding institutions, they are managing their cities after the fall of the state and the regime, and it is a very challenging task to do because there are no resources, there is no funding, and there are permanent attacks by the regime. Those areas I'm talking about in the north are liberated: there are no clashes on the ground. But there are constant airstrikes and missiles are launched on these cities.

So people are coming up with creative solutions: they are creating political institutions. There are local councils in each one of those cities and they meet on a weekly basis. They discuss everything in the city and they try to solve their problems.

And so there are millions of people who hear the media in the West and elsewhere talking about civil war and so on, and most of these people reject those labels. They believe there is a popular revolution in Syria. It's true that it's at a critical period and there are challenging tasks ahead of them, and there are jihadists who are trying to undermine their work, and obviously the regime.

Jeff Napolitano: And the jihadists are often sort of clustered in or considered part of the "rebels" but they are, as you say, quite distinct from the revolution itself.

YM: Right. It's been about three or four months now. The revolutionaries are actually fighting on two fronts. On the one hand there is the regime, on the other hand there is the Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda-created groups, the jihadists. And the jihadists are actually arresting, torturing, killing many activists — people who have been resisting since day one. Most of the Al-Qaeda-created groups are not really fighting the regime. They are staying in those northern parts. They are letting the Free Syrian Army and other factions to fight the regime and they come behind them and take over whatever liberated cities or villages there are. So they're very vicious. As I said, they're arresting activists. Anyone who criticizes them is arrested, tortured, sometimes killed. Right now they have more than 1,500 activists in their prisons.

So as you can see, there are two fronts in Syria right now: the jihadists on the one hand, and the regime on the other. And that's why many people believe that the jihadists are in some way or another actually allied to the Syrian regime. Al-Qaeda is actually selling oil to the regime. The pipeline has to go through the region controlled [inaudible] between Al-Qaeda-created groups and the regime to get that oil to reach the coast.

So things are much more complex than they seem here in the U.S. where most of the time you read articles about "Al-Qaeda" and "Al-Qaeda," and Al-Qaeda is actually not part of the revolution. It is anti-revolutionary.

JN: Right, the dominant debate in Congress it seems is, "Well, if we bomb Syria (and the fear isn't actually

bombing Syria) the fear is who is going to come to power if we bomb Syria.” So that’s sort of what the dialogue is. There are apparently many people in Congress, Republicans particularly, who seem to think that the problem with bombing Syria is just that Al-Qaeda is going to take over the country, as opposed to the fact that bombing the country is just not a good idea.

One of the popular myths (or I don’t know if it’s a myth, but you tell me), or impressions is that the rebels or revolutionaries (they’re not referred to as “revolutionaries,” they’re referred to as “rebels”) is that the folks that oppose Assad and the regime are in favor of a strike on Syria. Is that the case?

YM: You know, from far away I can’t really tell. I think that the population is split, many people are against. I think that some people, because of the destruction and the violence and the killing, they’re seeing the strike as a “way out,” but I don’t think that they are necessarily the majority. People have learned in the past 30 months that no one is really allied to their cause or cares about the Syrian population, that the Syrian people don’t really have any friends (because some people talk about the “Friends of Syria” and so on) and they understood that the West – Europe and the U.S. – are not necessarily in favor of the victory of the revolution. Actually, people know that – you know, when you talk to the average person in Syria in those liberated areas – they tell you that whenever they’re losing any territory or region when they’re fighting against the regime, they receive weapons; whenever they are winning, the weapons stop coming. And the reason why this is, is because the West and the U.S. want to see this war go on as a stalemate because that’s in their interest. They’re not necessarily in favor of the regime, and they’re not necessarily very favorable for the revolutionaries, or what they call “Al-Qaeda” to win. So the best thing for the U.S. has been so far to keep this conflict going. And that’s also in the interest of Israel, they don’t necessarily want to see the revolutionaries to win. And actually, for many Israeli politicians and U.S. politicians, they are in favor of a weakened Bashar in power.

JN: I’m really curious because nobody ever talks about this, or at least not in popular media in the United States, in fact most of the stuff that I read on the Left is about why it’s a bad idea to bomb Syria, but they don’t actually talk about what the revolution actually looks like.

And you’re talking about rebuilding institutions, and I’m sort of reminded the thing that I studied when I was in graduate school was the Spanish Revolution – the republican revolution that was fueled by the anarchists and the socialists in the 1930s – and they, too, were also struggling on sort of a war with two fronts: one being the fascists, and one the Communists, but that’s a different story. But what I was struck by are the descriptions of what the Revolution actually looked like in Spain, and sort of the egalitarian society that sort of just sprouted there. What does the revolution look like on the ground in Syria?

YM: The revolution is very complex, it’s very multi-layered, there are actually different things happening and going on. The most dominant part, let’s say, is the popular revolution, but there is also an ongoing semi-Cold War between the U.S. and its allies on the one hand, and Russia and its allies on the other. There is also a conflict between Iran and its allies on the one hand, and Israel and the Gulf on the other. So there are all these different layers of this conflict, but the most dominant one – and that’s what many Syrians believe – is the popular revolution. And I think this is very important to understand.

And another reason to compare the Syrian revolution to the Spanish War as you were saying is that every leftist, every progressive has an opinion about what is happening in Syria, as was the case with the Spanish Revolution many years ago. And most of the left, unfortunately, is taking the wrong position. They’re understanding the Syrian revolution in a very binary and reductive way –

JN: Is this the U.S. left or even the left in Syria?

YM: Even the left in Syria, the Arab left, and the U.S. and European left is split. For the most part, they are understanding this conflict as a war between, on the one hand, the U.S. and [on the other hand] people who are against the U.S.: “anti-imperialists” according to some people, so that would include Hizballah, Iran, Syria, and they believe that Syria has been helping Palestinians and so on. They have a very ignorant understanding of Syrian history and how violent the Syrian regime has been for the past 40 years, and how many times they betrayed the Palestinian struggle, and so on. And so in some ways those leftists or progressives are actually embracing the Bush doctrine: the either/or, where you don’t have any kind of complexity in your position”-

JN: The “either you’re with us or against us?”

YM: Yes, the binary, the reductive way of thinking about the revolution. And I think this is very detrimental. It’s sending the wrong message to the Syrian people. Many Syrians believe that the left by default is for the regime. Recently we have seen demonstrations in New York and other cities with people demonstrating against the war, but also holding and carrying pictures of Assad.

JN: In Boston, for example, just the other day I saw pictures. There was a prominent picture in the Boston Globe in an article against the protests and they focused on a group of people in the crowd who were waving Syrian flags that had Assad’s picture emblazoned in the middle of it, and portrayed the entire march as not just being against the strike on Syria, but being in favor of Assad. But I know from inside knowledge from some of the organizations that sponsored it, that that was antithetical to the message of what they were trying to get across.

YM: Right, right. And the left is “that” left (I don’t want to generalize) “that part of the left is losing its credibility. People either in the U.S. or in the Arab world or in Syria won’t necessarily get the message that this is really a message against the war. They’re going to see the pictures of Assad and understand that this is really propaganda, it’s not really against the war.

I think that the left has a real task ahead of it. It has to really formulate a new position, a more coherent position. A position where one can be at the same time against the war and also against dictatorship. And as long as they don’t do that, I think that they won’t have any kind of credibility. People in Syria will see that as almost a license to kill because the Syrian regime has been actually broadcasting those demonstrations on Syrian State TV, showing how much it is popular in the West and that people are demonstrating in the streets of New York and other cities showing those pictures of Assad. Actually the Syrian regime is not even able to organize such demonstrations or rallies in Syria, so it was very happy to see that emerging in many parts. And many of the people who are demonstrating actually don’t know anything about the reality that Syrians are living, and their struggles, and their fights, and their everyday resistance, and what they’re trying to build, and the creativity in what they’re doing.

I think that one is very humbled when you go to Syria and see what people are doing. And I think there is also racism, and just denying any kind of agency to the Syrians and saying, “this is all a conspiracy, the U.S. has been planning this since the beginning, it is conspiring against Assad,” and so on. And that means that the Syrians don’t have any agency, they can’t really think for themselves, they can’t really make a revolution, and so on. And I think that this is a big mistake that the left is doing.

JN: So I have the prescription that the General Secretary of the American Friends Services Committee put out in a letter to the President and to Congress, and what she calls for “and you let me know what you think of this” but what she calls for is a comprehensive arms embargo to all parties of the conflict, that the only solution in Syria is a political solution, and that we urge (“we” being the AFSC, “we” being the population of the United States), urge to provide full support to the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint UN-Arab League envoy, into press for a rapid convening of a Geneva II Conference, and that the U.S. should

seek a transition that builds on existing institutions rather than replacing them, and does not alienate those people who have served the government or the army. So that is the top of my organization that prescribes those as what we should do from here. What would you think about that, and what do you think that we should do? “We” being the U.S. population, the left in the U.S.

YM: I think the most important thing to do (for the progressive movement and for people who really care about the Arab revolution and they want to see them go somewhere, and support them, and show their solidarity) is basically move away from the alliances with different states, and build a social movement that supports the Syrian population.

And that solidarity of support can take many different forms. It can be through reporting: actually a responsible journalist who goes to Syria and sees what is happening on the ground, and try to take their job seriously. And not only report the in-fighting and the military aspect of the revolution because I think that's only the tip of the iceberg and that's the most visible part, but this is not the most important part. I think what is happening in Syria is much more than that. There are many revolutions going on in every field: the political, the cultural, the social, the economic. People are really creating new institutions with new ideas, they are trying to tackle the most difficult problems and try to solve them. And so I think that's part of what could be done.

People need doctors, they need engineers, they need any type of activist that could help them. All this type of solidarity, basically trying to replicate what people have been doing in Palestine: trying to build a global solidarity movement that transcends the state-centric kind of politics that has been taking place in the past 30 months only revolving around governments, and states, and armies, and so on. I think that's the most powerful message that we can send to the Syrian population: building an alternative social movement that's global, and that really understands the complexity of the Syrian revolution and doesn't reduce it to “jihadists” and “Al-Qaeda,” and understand that there are these different layers. Progressives and leftists should really push for the revolutionary part, and not just repeat this narrative of the “conspiracy” that just reduces it to what we've been seeing in the media.

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Interview transcribed by Linda Quiquix: