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Syria

Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria

- Features -

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The Syrian revolutionary process is still ongoing and has now taken both a peaceful and armed nature to confront the violent repression of the regime. The popular movement in Syria, despite its messages, statements and chants of unity and solidarity of the Syrian people, has had to face continuous accusations by the regime by and some specific groups on the left regionally and internationally of being dominated by extremist Islamists controlled by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while supporters of the regime have portrayed the Assad regime as secular and as a protector of religious minorities.

This does not mean however that sectarianism does not exist in Syria within the popular movement, it does and we should not deny its existence. In a revolutionary process, different ideologies are present and battle each other, and some groups in Syria resort to sectarian propaganda in their struggle against the regime.

What is therefore the role of the revolutionary left in this situation? Do we expect to leave the battle and wait for the perfect social revolution, as some do and did on the traditional left? Or do we decide to be a full part of this revolutionary process and throw our forces completely into this struggle to overthrow the regime and in the same time to work for the radicalization of the different elements of the revolution?

Lenin answered this question a while ago:

“To imagine that social revolution is conceivable ... without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism”, and another, somewhere else and says, “We are for imperialism”, and that will be a social revolution!...”

“Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.”

A revolutionary process is not of a single colour and will never be so; otherwise it would not be a revolution. On the other hand, the role of the revolutionary left is crystal clear: struggle against the regime and radicalize the popular movement!

We have nevertheless shown and demonstrated in many articles how the great majority of the Syrian popular movement has repeatedly rejected sectarianism since the beginning of the uprising, despite the regime’s attempts to ignite this dangerous fire. The slogans of the demonstrators such as “We are all Syrians, we are united” are repeated constantly. In many demonstrations we have seen banners saying “No to sectarianism”. The Local Coordination Committees last June organized a campaign under the banner, “Freedom is My Sect”, in which it raised signs indicating its rejection of the abominable sectarian discourse, the regime’s sectarian practices, and the regime’s deadly attempts to drag the Syrian Revolution into a sectarian trap [1]

In the Saraqeb Committee, LCC demonstrators raised signs bearing the symbols of all the Syrian sects [2], while

demonstrators in Dael raised a sign saying “In the future Syria, the exclusion policy will end”. In the past few months we also saw placards on which was written “sectarianism is the grave of the revolution”.

The popular movement has reaffirmed its struggle for the unity of the Syrian people and against these divisions, developing a sense of national solidarity that transcends ethnic and sectarian divisions.

What is less well known is the use of sectarianism by the regime as a weapon to divide the Syrians both on a religious and ethnic basis, which has been used since Hafez Al Assad came to power. This does not mean that the regime is sectarian or composed of one sect as some in the Syrian opposition or so-called analysts present it.

It is an authoritarian and clientelist regime that has found support among the predominantly Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie in Aleppo and Damascus, who have benefited from the neoliberal policies of recent years, especially since the launch of the social market economy in 2005. This sits alongside the security service apparatus, mostly dominated by Alawis personalities, and networks of bureaucrats and crony capitalists consolidated around public sector patronage, which increasingly developed in the 1990s in the private sector after the implementation of the investment law Decree No. 10 of 1991. [3]

We should not forget that in 1970, the urban merchants of Aleppo and Damascus had praised the arrival of Hafez Al Assad to power and the beginning of the “the Corrective Movement” (*harakat tashiyya*) he launched, which put an end to the radical policies of the 1960s that challenged their capital and political power. The urban merchants, who had been very active against the left wing of the Ba’ath at this period, sent demonstrators into the streets of big cities with banners that read “We implored God for Aid – Al Madad. He sent us Hafiz Al Assad” [4]. Since that period the regime has built a network of loyalties through various ties, mainly economic, with individuals from different communities.

It is nevertheless true that the security apparatus is composed in its majority of Alawis, linked very often by kinship, tribal or family ties to the Assad family.

The use of sectarianism as a weapon was developed in the following ways, in conjunction with repression of oppositional popular secular and civil organization and political parties, while promoting sectarian and primary identities, such as tribal links, among Syrians.

This policy was deployed by the authoritarian capitalist regime to divide Syrians and divert any criticism of its corruption, social inequalities, repression and absence of democracy.

Sectarianism – a weapon of the ruling class to divide the people

Sectarianism is very often explained as the revival of primordial passions, or the immemorial hatred between two communities, for example between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon; Alawis and Sunnis in Syria; or even Christians and Sunnis in Egypt. In this case, sectarianism is therefore understood as a hangover of past history preventing the modernization of these countries, or as something that is essential to the people of the region.

We disagree strongly with this understanding of sectarianism and on the contrary believe it to be, unfortunately we might say, a product of modernity. Dr Ussama Makdissi explained well this dilemma around the analysis of sectarianism and wrote this in his book:

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“Among the greatest red herrings of the history of the Middle East has been the characterization of sectarianism as an obstacle to modernity and as a symptom of a so-called arc of crisis. This interpretation has led to an increasingly frustrated path of historical inquiry, with some scholars earnestly searching backward in time for answers while the problem of sectarianism marches forward, growing ever more entrenched and even more complex. The beginning of sectarianism did not imply a reversion. It marked a rupture, a birth of a new culture that singled out religious affiliation as the defining public and political characteristic of a modern subject and citizen.” [5]

Yes, sectarianism is a product of modernity and it has been one of the preferred weapons of the authoritarian and capitalist countries of the region to divide the people and repress popular movements. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, despite calls and statements against sectarianism and for the unity of the people against the dictatorship made by the opposition, which brought together Sunni and Shia citizens of the countries, the authorities have accused them of being sectarian movements supported by Iran.

A Saudi comrade explained the situation well by saying that:

“Sectarianism is a product of the regime which creates discrimination between workers and state employees and creates myths for each section of workers, in order to break all efforts to unify and act directly by confronting the class which exploits and oppresses. That’s why we created a struggle between the Shiite and Sunni sects – while in reality there is no relationship of exploitation between the poor Sunnis and the poor Shias.” [6]

In Lebanon, sectarianism emerged as the result of two primordial elements, which developed together on the one hand in the context of Ottoman reforms in the nineteenth century in Mount Lebanon and on the other hand the development and expansion of European capitalism in the Middle East. Usama Makdissi’s book [7] perfectly explains its development in the culture of Lebanon and dates its appearance as well: “When the old regime in Mount Lebanon, dominated by a hierarchy in which the secular rather than rank religious affiliation defined politics, was discredited in the mid-nineteenth century.”

These changes were a reflection of social transformations, specifically related to the development of silk industry, concentrated in the Maronite villages of Mount Lebanon, which began in the eighteenth century. Until today, the various political forces of Lebanon, both from March 8 and March 14, [8] use sectarianism and the sectarian political system to establish and develop their power, while in the same time pursuing policies aimed at dividing the people, in addition to impoverishing them by promoting neoliberal policies, to prevent any popular mobilization uniting the Lebanese citizens against their rule.

In Egypt the military regime has used sectarian policies on many occasions in the past; notably in repressing demonstrations led by Coptic demonstrators as in Maspero in November 2011, or by the attempt to divide and create fear among Muslims and Christians. The best example was the 2010 New Year’s Eve bombing of al-Qiddissin Church in Alexandria in which 21 people were killed, and where former Interior Minister Habib el-Adly’s was accused of being behind this terrorist act.

As we can observe, sectarianism is a weapon in the hand of the ruling class to oppress and divide the people and especially the downtrodden of all societies. In all these cases we are not facing sectarian regimes guided by sectarian interests, but authoritarian, bourgeois and clientelist states using sectarian policies as one of their instruments to repress and divide the people.

The Syrian regime has not lagged behind in this kind of policy. It has developed a dual policy of repressing independent popular civic and secular organizations and political parties, leaving as the only alternatives organizations from the regime, while reinforcing sectarian including tribal, identities through the ages in different

ways.

We will look at the policies of the regime aimed at deepening sectarian policies in the last 40 years without forgetting that the regime has used them in the current uprising, for example using intense propaganda of a sectarian and fundamentalist Sunni uprising to describe the revolutionary process, or arming some minority religious groups for example Christians in Damascus, but not only, including tribes and others, to involve them in their struggle against the so called “terrorists”.

The repression of secular and civil political organizations and political parties

The coming of Hafez Al Assad to power marked a new era in Syria where independent popular organizations – from trade unions, professional associations and civic associations – came under the regime’s authority after harsh repression. Professional unions of doctors, lawyers, engineers and pharmacists were dissolved in 1980. They were the main organizations to have led the struggle for the return of democratic freedoms and the lifting of the emergency rule in the years before. They were later re-established and their leaders were replaced by state appointees. [9]

In the school system, the regime targeted principally leftist teachers from different tendencies in the 1970s, at the same time letting religious fundamentalists currents develop. [10] Independent intellectuals, such as Michel Kilo and Wadi Iskandar, and university teachers critical of the regime, including Rif’at Sioufi and Asef Shahine, were also the targets. [11]

No immunity was granted to university campuses in any way, neither to teacher nor students. Security agencies could arrest students inside lecture halls or on campus.

In a similar manner the regime imposed its domination on the trade union bureaucracy, which prevented and hindered the labour struggle against the neo-liberal policies pursued by the authoritarian regime since 2000. This caused a decline in the standard of living of the majority of people, as well as political repression, and these were the main causes of the wave of protests, which in the past years were turning around the economic question. For example, in May 2006, hundreds of workers protested at the public construction company in Damascus, and clashed with security forces, and at the same period taxi drivers went on strike in Aleppo.

Just as in the past, the workers' trade unions are completely silent in the face of the repression of the Syrian people, and more specifically against workers. These latter have also been target of the repression. Successful campaigns of general strikes and civil disobedience in Syria during December 2011, paralyzing large parts of the country also shows the activism of the working class and the exploited who are indeed the heart of the Syrian revolution.

For this reason, the dictatorship laid off more than 85,000 workers and closed 187 factories between January 2011 and February 2012 (according to official figures) in order to break the dynamics of protest.

Repression also included all political parties who refused to submit to the diktat of Hafez Al Assad and to enter the umbrella of the National Progressive Front, where they had almost no rights for political activities other than those approved by the regime. It is not only the Muslim Brotherhood that has suffered from the harsh repression since the regime came to power.

At the beginning of the Seventies, various secular political parties, especially from leftist tendencies, were targeted by

the regime, including the movement of February 23 (the radical tendency of the Ba'ath close to Salah Jadid), the League of Communist Action (Rabita al amal al shuyu'i), whose members mostly came from the Alawi sect, and to a lesser extent the Communist Party Political Bureau (CPPB) of Ryad Turk. [12] The National gathering, which included various leftist parties, was also severely repressed at the beginning of the 1980s.

This trend has continued in the 2000s with Bachar Al Assad's coming to power. From 2000 to 2006 an opposition movement bringing together intellectuals, artists, writers, scholars and even politicians demanding reforms and democratization of the state was accompanied by the opening of forums to debate and, between 2004 and 2006 by the multiplication of sit-ins, a new political phenomenon in Syria. Calls for sit-ins came from political parties and civil organizations at the same time. The government of Bashar Al Assad cracked down on this movement; forums were actually closed, sit-ins were severely repressed and many intellectuals who launched this call for civil society and democratization were imprisoned. At the same time the Kurdish Intifada of 2004 was severely repressed.

Syrian society fell increasingly under the control of the regime in its various components. The Ba'ath Party was the only political organization that had the right to organize events, lectures and public demonstrations on a university campus or military barracks or to publish and distribute a newspaper in such places. Even the political parties allied to the regime in the National Progressive Front did not have the right to organize, to make propaganda or to have a small official presence in these institutions. The Ba'ath also controlled an array of corporatist associations through which various sectors of society were brought under the tutelage of the regime. They were called popular organizations and incorporated peasants, youth and women.

Regarding the role of the Ba'ath in society, it should be said that the party lost all its ideological credentials and dynamics when Hafez Al Assad came to power. He transformed it into an instrument of control of society. The party organization was modified with an end to internal elections, replacing them with a top down system of designation decided by the regime and the security services, while elements opposing the regime policies were repressed.

Rifaat Al Assad summed up his political conception of the Ba'ath party by referring to its model at the VII Regional Congress : "the leader designates, the party approves and the people cheer. This is how socialism functions in the Soviet Union. Who does not cheer goes to Siberia..." [13]

The post 1970s party elite has tended to take on the traits of functionaries, while their former comrades of the 1950s and 1960s were often dedicated militants and/ or enthusiastic activists. [14]

The period from the 1970s was characterized by mass enrolment in the party with the objective of broadening the popular base, as far as far possible to use the party as the main instrument for extending the regime's control of society. From a total membership of the party of 65 398 in 1971, it rose to 374 332 in 1981 and 1,008,243 by June 30, 1992. [15]

The sectarian composition of the Ba'ath was also used on some occasions by the regime to alter the public perception of the "sectarian" character of the regime or more precisely to respond to some attacks from particular parts of the opposition. In January 1980, he induced changes in the makeup of the Ba'ath regional command raising the proportions of Sunnis from 57.1 to 66.7%, while the numbers of Alawis decreased from 33.3 to 19%. [16] Tribal links also played an important role in the composition of the Ba'ath during these past few years.

The sectarian play in the regime in different institutions, Ba'ath, Parliament (People assembly) and army

The repression of popular organizations went in hand in hand with the increased connection and collaboration with predominantly Sunni urban business community through policies of economic rapprochement and controlled

liberalization, as well as with conservative elements of society. This was reflected in the various institutions of the regime. Significant numbers of urban Sunnis, mainly from Damascus, were co-opted into the top ranks of the party and many non-party technocrats brought into the government. [17]

In the People's Assembly, greater voice and space was given to members of the professions or businessmen or religious Shaykhs and even some traditional tribal leaders among the non-party and independent elements. They occupied 33.2% of the seats in Parliament in 1994. [18]

Hafez Al Assad's objective was to assure the stability of the regime, play secure capital accumulation and appease powerful segments of the business community. [19] Private businesses were given an increasing role under Hafez Al Assad's rule, as well as religious conservatives' elements.

The Muslim Brotherhood was severely repressed in the 1970s and 1980s, but this did not prevent the regime developing a religious conservative discourse in total contradiction with the picture conveyed by a so-called secular regime. The regime built numbers of mosques and made large contributions to Shariah or Islamic schools, patronized ulama, raised the pay of the country's Sunnis religious establishment from Imams, mudarris, khatibs, etc. several times in the 1970s and propagated Islam in the mass media, while trying to encourage a conservative Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and legitimate the regime. [20]

In 1973, following protests and criticism from certain Sunni religious personalities such as Shaykh Hassan Habannakah, Hafez Al Assad introduced an amendment to the new constitution adopted by the People's Assembly the same year, which declared that "the religion of the president is Islam" [21]. This article has actually been kept in the "new" Constitution adopted by the current regime in March 2012, and "Islamic jurisprudence doctrine is a primary source of all legislation" was added to re-enforce the Islamic credentials of the regime.

The regime of Bashar Al Assad has continued these kinds of policies and has increased the collaboration with religious associations and conservative segments of the society in conjunction with the new Social market economy and the implementation of accelerated neo liberal policies. This meant the withdrawal of the state from social subventions and many essential public areas.

Prior to the beginning of the revolution 30.1% of the population lived below the poverty line and almost two million people – or 11.4% of the population – had not the means to meet their basic needs. [22] Real GDP growth and real per capita income has been decreasing since the beginning of the 90s. This has pushed the regime to continue its neo liberal policies and search for more private capital. [23]

In the area of health, the regime withdrew considerably, leaving increasing space to charitable associations, and especially religious ones. In 2004, around 300 associations were providing a total of 842 millions of Syrian Pounds (SP) to more than 72000 families. [24] The most successful and notorious of these is the Jama'at Zayd, which has deep and rooted relations with the Damascus Sunni bourgeoisie, conducted by Rifa'i brothers, despite their well-known opposition of the religious association to the regime in the past.

Although it has a rather oppositional tone to the regime nowadays, the association did not hesitate to have relations and collaborate with it in the past, notably by obtaining the control of new mosques at expense of others, and some of their members were able also to reach important posts in various religious official institutions. [25] Neo-liberal policies have reinforced religious associations, both Islamic and Christian, in Syria and their network of diffusion, increasing their role in society at the expense of the state.

Around 10 000 mosques and hundreds of religious schools were built and more than 200 conferences headed by

clerics were held in cultural centres of important towns during the year 2007. At the same time, the high religious establishments of all the sects were used by the regime as actors of “Syrian civil society” to present a modern and consensual image of the country to foreign delegations visiting the country.

Bachar Al Assad did not hesitate to meet Yusuf Al Qardawi, currently “supporting” the revolution against the regime, who visited Damascus in 2009 at the head of the World Union of Ulemas.

The regime has continued a policy of détente started at the beginning of the 1990s towards opposition Islamists through the release of thousands of political prisoners in 1992, tolerance of Islamist publications and some movements as long as they refrained from political involvement.

In 2001 for example, Shaykh Abu Al fath Al Bayanuni, the brother of the ex-head of the Muslim Brotherhood, was authorized to come back after 30 years of exile and his son, a rich businessman, participated in the creation in 2010 of the first sexually segregated mall in Syria. [26] These policies were also part of a strategy to create and deepen the rapprochement with economic elites of Aleppo.

These governmental measures were also accompanied by censorship of literary and artistic works, while promoting a religious literature that was filling the shelves of libraries more and more and Islamizing the field of higher education. This is true particularly in the humanities and expresses itself in rather systematic referral to religious references in any scientific, social and cultural phenomenon. In 2007 the government also withdrew authorizations from two feminist organizations (the Social Initiative and one organization affiliated to the Communist Party linked to the regime) following pressure from various religious groups and personalities. [27]

At the beginning of the uprising in April 2011, the regime actually sought to reach to the conservative sectors of the society by closing the country’s only casino and scrapping a ruling that banned teachers from wearing the niqab. The regime had banned the niqab from the classroom in July 2010, forcing hundreds of women from teaching roles into administrative positions. The regime also met with a number of religious dignitaries from different towns to try to appease the protest movement.

The Alawis, or the will to build a political sect submitted to the leadership of the Assad family

In the 1960s, the Ba’ath’s access to power improved the standard of living of the population in rural areas considerably. This included Alawis “who used to be in their majority but not exclusively from rural areas” giving them more social and economic opportunities. There has been a political strategy by the Assad regime since Hafez’s arrival to power to link the Alawi community not only to the regime but more precisely to the Assad clan. The regime has developed different policies in trying to reach this objective, trying to eliminate any dissent voice inside the Alawi community and to transform it into a political sect linked to the Assad clan. They have, however, never realized this objective.

Firstly Hafez Al Assad eliminated possible Alawi military alternatives to his rule, who had relations with the Sunni Damascene bourgeoisie, including the general Muhammad Omran, assassinated in Lebanon in 1971. Through his position as historical chief of the Ba’ath military committee and close relations to the civil wing of the Ba’ath Party of Salaheddin Bitar he was a threat to Hafez Al Assad. Hafez Al Assad also imprisoned Salah Jdid, who was in power from 1966 to 1970, from his arrival to power until 1993.

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The regime was behind the formation of the Imam Ali al Murtada association in 1981, which had the objective to weld the Alawi community together and to increase the power of Jamil Assad's, the President's brother in the region of Lattakia where he resided. This latter actually said the objective of the association was to develop an Alawi "personality" (Shakhsiyya). [28] Jamil Assad particularly used the association against the local Ba'ath party, presenting candidates of the association against it in the elections to the People's Assembly in 1980, to build a network of patronage in the city and its outskirts. The Ali Murtadas association was nevertheless short-lived and ended in 1983, following increasing criticisms and protests from the Ba'ath party and members of the regime.

Except for the Ali al Murtada association, the regime did not allow the development of any charitable sectarian organization in the Alawi community, unlike other sects. The Assad family did not want any alternative source of power inside the community. Most of the relationships were established on a clientelist basis between the Alawi community and officials on a personal level following a variety of forms derived from mutual interests and loyalties to the family or of narrow clan. Many in the Alawi community complained that most of the officials of this community were helping other communities more than them because these latter paid more, or because of an unwillingness to engage in issues of bribery with relatives and acquaintances, who might criticize them. [29]

In the same vein of preventing any other source of power among the community, the Assad regime did not allow any form of civil representation to form a higher Alawi Supreme Council, such as the Shiite Supreme Council or the Ismaeli Supreme Council, there are no public religious references for the Alawi community. This was not due to the so-called secularism of the regime, but in order to link the community to the regime and the total domination of the Assad family. The regime also encouraged tribal division within the Alawi community, allowing the emergence of narrow tribal loyalties within the community. [30] There are no private chambers or lawcourts for the Alawi community; they follow the same laws as the Sunni community regarding the law of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc...).

The Alawi community on the other hand did not benefit from any specific economic policies favouring them against other communities from the regime. In the 1990s, the scholar Hanna Batatu wrote that complaints were made by the Alawis from the highlands that the bulk of peasants in their areas were destitute of comforts and were still dependent for tillage on erratic weather conditions. In addition to this, their real earnings from agriculture diminished and many had to seek additional sources of revenue. [31]

A recent report stated that "the Alawi countryside remains strikingly underdeveloped; many join the army for lack of an alternative; members of the security services typically are overworked and underpaid. Young members of the community for the most part joined the security apparatus solely because the regime offered them no other prospects. Ordinary Alawis rarely benefited, from high-level corruption, least of all under Bashar". [32]

These trends were common to other regions in Syria and show the similar conditions of all Syrians regardless of their community.

The Alawi Mountain is the second most impoverished region after the North Eastern ones populated in majority by the Kurdish people. The region and the Alawi community suffered just like others in the country of the liberalization of the economy, the end of subventions and high inflations.

These policies of the regime were not totally successful in homogenizing the community around the leadership of the Assad leadership and linked its destiny to it, as many in the community have been and are struggling against the regime.

Alawi activists such as the feminist Hanady Zahlout and long-time dissidents Habib Saleh, Samar Yazbeck, Louai

Hussein and Fadwa Soleiman are all figures of the opposition, without forgetting prominent economist and opposition member Aref Dalila, who has spent many years in prison for his activities against the regime. An Alawi brigade was also formed in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the province of Idlib, while numbers of officers and soldiers of the community have defected as well. [33]

Facebook pages have appeared showing the involvement of the community in the uprising, such as “Alawi Coalition Against the Assad Family Regime,” “Committee of anti-Bashar Assad Alawi Youth – Homs”. There has also been a profusion of like-minded public statements, with titles like “Statement by Members of the Alawi Sect,” or following the Houla massacre as well.

Anti-Kurdish discrimination

Since 1970 the Assad regime has increased the discrimination against Kurdish people and raised tensions between the different populations (Kurdish, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmens) living in the North East of Syria to hide the corruption and social and economic problems of this most impoverished region – despite the oil reserves present there. In this case it was the ethnic divide that was used to separate the people.

Under the Assad regime, the Kurds “who constitute more than 10 per cent of the population and are the largest minority in the country” have always had second-class status. They are neither allowed to teach their own language nor cultivate their traditions. Behaviour violating these rules could result in a 10-year prison sentence.

The Kurdish population has been deliberately kept impoverished. Land was leased to Arab landowners, oil fields were taken from them by the state and roads were left in disrepair.

Between 1972 and 1977, a policy of colonization was implemented in specific regions with a large Kurdish population. Around 25 000 “Arab” peasants, whose lands were flooded by the construction of the Tabqa dam, were sent in the High Djezireh and established in “modern villages” close to Kurdish villages. [34] The new “modern villages” were well equipped in water, electricity, hospitals, schools, roads, police stations, etc... while their Kurdish neighbours were lacking nearly everything. The Kurdish population in these regions faced daily discrimination including the dismissal of teachers, under the pretext they were foreigners, layoffs of workers, destruction of houses, and arrests of political leaders etc... [35]

The Syrian government has changed Kurdish place names to Arabic, banned shop signs in Kurmanji and prevented parents from registering their children with Kurdish names.

This policy of the “Arab Belt” was a plan for a cordon sanitaire between Syrian and neighbouring Kurds around the northern and northeastern rim of the Jazira, along the borders with Turkey and Iraq. Kurdish land was confiscated and Kurds told to resettle in the Syrian interior to make way for Arabs. There was also a strong military presence in this cordon and Arab settlements were provided with superior facilities and state benefits to encourage greater economic prosperity. [36]

There were periodic protests, confrontations and arrests in the 1980s and 1990s, often on significant days such as Newruz (Kurdish New Year) or the anniversary of the al-Hasaka census, the 1962 census in east Syria, which resulted in around 150 000 Kurdish being denied nationality. It left them, and subsequently their children, denied basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination. They number today more than 300 000.

In 2004, the Kurdish uprising that started in the city of Qamichlo and spread to in Kurdish areas across Syria – the Jazira, Afrin, Aleppo and Damascus – was severely repressed by security forces and the use of Arab tribes by the regime in the North East region. Many Kurdish activists and protesters were killed and arrested, more than 2000, while others were forced to leave the country.

At the beginning of the revolutionary process, Bachar Al Assad issued a decree in Aril, following meetings with Kurdish representatives, granting to persons registered as foreigners in the governorate of Hassake Syrian Arab citizenship, while 48 prisoners, mainly Kurds, were also released. Many stateless Kurdish are nevertheless still awaiting for citizenship until now.

The celebration of the Kurdish New Year festival of Newruz was also allowed by the regime in 2011, while before security forces would always intervene and repress any citizen celebrating it. These decisions were made to appease to Kurdish population feelings especially.

Kurdish activists have been playing a leading role in the uprising and are very present in the revolutionary process, though the press underplays their role. Many Kurdish activists have actually been the targets of Syrian security forces during the current uprising.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this article the regime is the main force responsible for the creation and perpetuation of sectarian feelings and relationships. For the past 40 years, the Assad regime has encouraged and implemented policies dividing the people along sectarian and ethnic lines in order to rule the country. All these elements, together the repression of popular and civic secular organizations, the lack of secular voices, which are normally filled up by the working class which has suffered various forms of repression and cooptation of the union bureaucracy, have allowed space for a rhetoric of sectarianism that manifests itself among the most conservative elements of the Syrian revolution. The regime is therefore responsible for the division created among the Syrian people rather than, as they claim, a conspiracy supported by foreign actors to divide the country. Our task as revolutionary socialists is to smash the main source of sectarianism, in other words the regime, and its perpetuators who are the reactionary and opportunist elements within the revolution.

Ussama Makdissi wrote that “to overcome sectarianism, if it is at all possible, requires yet another rupture, a break as radical for the body politic as the advent of sectarianism was for the old regime, It requires another vision of modernity”. [\[37\]](#)

The struggle against sectarianism is part of the struggle to overthrow this criminal regime, and to establish a radical break with the past. This break with the sectarian policies of the regime also opposes the section of the oppositions using a sectarian discourse and backed by the Arab Gulf states in their sectarian propaganda. Sectarianism can only be defeated by struggling in conjunction for democracy, social justice, secularism and real independence.

The secularism we call for is not separated from our struggle for democracy, socialism and anti-imperialism. Our secularism is part of our revolutionary struggle to liberate religion from political parties and to let people live freely their religion without the oppression of the state. Our revolutionary secularism does not differentiate from the different sects and ethnicities, and oppose any discrimination. In addition, our secularism calls as well for social equality and not only equality before the law, in other words, struggle against social inequalities and injustices created and increased by the capitalist system, while we also oppose all forms of imperialism and act in solidarity with people in struggle, and firstly and mostly with the Palestinian people.

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This means that we are in a full and total class struggle. These words in the struggle against sectarianism of a Lebanese Comrade make full sense for the case of Syria as well: "It's not a struggle for a more tolerant society. This is a class struggle – that is both a struggle against the dominant ideas and a struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors. This struggle can't be waged by the bourgeoisie; on the contrary, it can only be conducted by a fight against the ruling bourgeoisie. This is where the centrality of the working class is no longer a theoretical question. Indeed, the only line of defence of the Lebanese people against the sectarian divisions and the brutal attacks of the ruling class is the class unity." [38]

The struggle against sectarianism is part of the struggle against the capitalist system and to unite the oppressed of Syria, be they Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, Sunni, Christians or Alawi to overthrow the regime and build a new Syria. As chanted by the protesters, the Syrian people are one and freedom is my sect! Long live the Syrian revolution!

This article was first published in Arabic in the magazine **Thawra Dai'ma** The link to the [article in Arabic](#).

[1] LCC (June 2012), [Freedom is my sect](#).

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?...>

[3] Haddad B. (2012), *Business networks in Syria, the political economy of authoritarian resilience*, XIV

[4] Batatu H. (1998), *Syria's Peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and the politics*, 175

[5] Makdissi U. (2000), *The culture of sectarianism, community, history and violence in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon*, 174

[6] <http://prjournal.socialist-forum.or...> (??????: ??? ????? ?????? ? ??? ? ????????)

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[10] Seurat M. (1983), *L'Etat de barbarie Syrie, 1979-1982*, 138.

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[14] Batatu H. (1999) *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its lesser rural notables and their politics*, 245.

[15] Ibid 174.

[16] Ibid 272.

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[18] Batatu 277.

[19] Haddad 44

[20] Hinnebush, 83

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[22] PNUD (2005), Poverty in Syria 1996-2004,

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[24] *Al hayat*, January 5 2006

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[32] <http://www.crisisgroup.org/ /media/...>

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