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Syria

Syria, and the So-Called Russian Military “Withdrawal”

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Massive popular demonstrations have continued to take place throughout the liberated areas of Syria for the past three weeks under the slogan “The revolution continues”. Hundreds of protests were recorded on the “Friday of Dignity” on March 18, 2016 from the north to the south of the country. The Syrian revolutionary flag was waved everywhere, while Salafi jihadist forces and their symbols were still absent from these protests in recent weeks. Some small rallies were also held in some towns and villages in the Kurdish majority regions with slogans promoting unity between Arabs and Kurds and solidarity with other cities and regions of Syria. A big demonstration was held in the city of Qamishli on March 12, 2016 which has a majority populated of Kurds but with also Arab and Assyrian populations, to commemorate the twelve years since the start of the Kurdish uprising in Syria in 2004, which included also slogans against the Assad regime.

In the town of Maaret al-Numan, near the city of Idlib, protesters continue to oppose the authoritarian practices of Jabhat al-Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria). Demonstrators also stormed and burned Jabhat Al-Nusra’s offices in the city and demanded the release of democratic activists and members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) imprisoned by Jabhat Al-Nusra. The regions around the town have shown their solidarity with revolutionaries of Ma’aret al-Numan and their opposition to Jabhat Al-Nusra.

Russian military withdrawal?

The announcement of the withdrawal of the main Russian military forces in Syria by President Putin on March 14 has not yet prevented the continuation of the bombing campaign by Moscow’s military air forces in several regions of the country, in particular to support the army of the Assad regime, and the maintenance of Russian troops in some military bases. Hmeymim Air Base, southeast of the city of Latakia, for example continues to be used by the Russian air force as well as the naval base of Tartus. Putin has promised to protect these bases from land, sea and air. Russian helicopters, armor, long-range rocket batteries and most of the estimated 5,000 Russian personnel also appear to have remained in Syria. Russia is also leaving behind its most advanced S-400 air defense system and Putin declared that Moscow would not hesitate to shoot down “any target” which violated Syrian air space.

The Russian military withdrawal remains therefore very partial and should be highly nuanced. Besides Russian President Putin said on March 17 that Moscow could scale up its military presence in Syria again within hours and would still bomb “terrorist groups”. He added that Russia would also continue to strengthen the Syrian army with weapons, training and operational guidance.

Russian bombing has also killed 55 Syrian civilians, including 13 children, on the weekend of 19 and 20 March in the city Raqqa and its outskirts. Moscow also supports Assad regime’s army in its current offensive to take back the city of Palmyra occupied by Daech. Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoi said Russian aircraft based in Syria were still conducting 20-25 sorties a day in support of the Palmyra offensive.

The announcement of Russian military withdrawal came mainly as a diplomatic gesture before the new round of “peace negotiations,” which resumed in Geneva in mid-March with the participation of representatives of the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition of the Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf in arabic) dominated by right wing, liberal forces and the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. The main Kurdish force in Syria, the PYD, was not invited to these new rounds of negotiations because of the Turkish government’s

opposition that holds the organization as a “terrorist” group. Harsh skepticism around the negotiations is nevertheless the rule. The representatives of the Assad regime have for example submitted a document to the United Nation’s mediator Staffan de Mistura as a basis for discussion of a political solution in which the official propaganda of the regime is repeated. You can actually find within this document the necessity of maintaining the secular nature of the state (while it is far from being the case currently or in the past under the Assad regime), maintaining Syria’s territorial integrity and the importance of fighting terrorism, but it said nothing about a political transition. Previously, the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem had actually said that the Presidency was a red line and that this issue was not subject to discussion.

Establishment of the “federal democratic system of Rojava – Northern Syria”

On March 17, 2016, the “federal democratic system of Rojava – Northern Syria” in areas controlled by the PYD in the north of the country was established officially. Following a meeting of more than 150 representatives of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian parties in the city Rmeilane in north-eastern Syria, participants voted in favour of the union of three “cantons” in majority populated by Kurdish people (Afrin, Kobanî, Jazireh). The Assad regime and the Syrian National Coalition have both stated their opposition to this announcement, while Washington, despite its support for the PYD, and Turkey have both declared they would not recognize this federal entity. The Syrian Foreign Ministry said that “the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic warns anyone tempted to undermine the unity of the land and the people of Syria,” and adding that “Any such announcement has no legal value and will not have any legal, political, social or economic impact as long as it does not reflect the will of the entire Syrian people”. The Syrian National Coalition called the PYD initiative as “illegitimate” and “unacceptable”. 69 armed groups, including the Army of Islam, Islamist and FSA forces, also signed a statement opposing the Kurdish federalist project dominated by the PYD.

The demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the near quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country, but other Kurdish parties gathered around the Kurdish National Congress have opposed this announcement because it has to be established, according to them, following discussions and explanations with actors of the Syrian Arab opposition, whom for a large majority see it as a step towards separatism and division as we have seen on many placards in demonstrations on Friday, March 18. In addition to this, the policies of the PYD towards the Assad regime, which includes maintaining communication channels open since the uprising began in 2011, cohabiting with regime forces in the cities of Qamishli and Hassake, (despite occasional confrontations as recently when the YPG, PYD military force, has arrested more than 60 members of the Assad regime security services in Qamishli) and numerous abuses and violations of Human Rights against Syrian Arab civilians in areas dominated by the military forces of PYD, raise suspicions and opposition of a part of the Arab population of Syria.

We also have to understand that the demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in decades of state oppression on a national basis (policies of colonization in the framework of the “Arab belt” and cultural repression) and on socio-economic as well. The most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds such as in the Jazireh. The Jazireh is the region with the highest level of poverty, hosting 58% of the country’s poor population before the occurrence of the 2004 drought, and illiteracy rate. In 2010, poverty increased considerably reaching 80 per cent of the Jazireh inhabitants according to the de Shutter report. In addition to this, the Jazireh region for example produced two thirds of the country cereals (70 percent of wheat) and three quarters of its hydrocarbons. The industrial underdevelopment of the Jazireh, industrial installations were scarce in the region, comprising only 7% of the overall sector, was nevertheless important, for example 69 per cent of Syrian cotton was produced in the region, but only 10 per cent of cotton threads were spun there. Of course all the populations, Arabs, Assyrians, and Kurds, of the regions suffered from the State lack of service and poverty.

That said, I believe we must provide unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere, without meaning being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party, while stating very clearly that it is the unity of the Syrian people, including Arabs and Kurds, on the

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basis of a democratic and inclusive program that will allow their liberation and emancipation against the counter-revolutionary forces of the Assad regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces.

The international solidarity of democratic and progressive organizations around the world, which is still lacking to the Syrian people in struggle for freedom and dignity, is absolutely necessary and must be intensified.

22 March 2016

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