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Arab uprisings:

# Syria between Revolution and Counter-Revolutions

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**Gilbert Achcar, author of the new book *The People Want* was interviewed by Terry Conway for *Socialist Resistance* in London in September.**

**TC: Could you assess the present state of the Arab uprising in general before we focus more specifically on Syria?**

GA: What is happening now is a confirmation of what could be said from the start; the fact that what began in December 2010 in Tunisia, was not a 'Spring' as the media called it, a brief period of political change during which one despot or another is overthrown, opening the way for a nice parliamentary democracy, and that's it. The uprisings were portrayed as a 'Facebook revolution', another one of these 'colour revolutions'. I, for one, insisted from the beginning that this was a misrepresentation of reality. What started unfolding in 2011 was a long-term revolutionary process, which would develop over many, many years if not decades, especially if we take into account its geographic extension.

From that perspective, what we have had so far is just the opening phase of the process. In some countries they have managed to go beyond the initial stage of overthrowing existing governments; this was the case in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya – the three countries where the regimes were overthrown by the uprising. And you can see that these countries are still in a state of turmoil, instability, which is usual in revolutionary periods.

Those eager to believe that the Arab uprising has ended or was stillborn focused on the initial victory of Islamic forces in elections in Tunisia and Egypt. Against such doomsayers, I stressed the fact that this was actually unavoidable since elections held shortly after the overthrow of the despotic regime could only reflect the balance of organised forces that existed in these countries. I argued that the Islamic fundamentalists' period in power would not last long, if we consider the real roots of the revolutionary process.

This long-term revolutionary process is rooted in the social reality of the region, characterised by many decades of stalled development – a higher rate of unemployment, especially youth unemployment, than in any other region in the world over several decades. These were the real basic causes of the explosion, and as long as these causes are not addressed, the process will continue. Any new government which has no solutions to these root problems will fail. It was predictable that the Muslim Brotherhood would fail: in my book *The People Want*, which was of course written before Morsi's overthrow in Egypt, I argued that the Muslim Brotherhood would fail inevitably.

I wrote the same about Ennahda in Tunisia, which is now faced with a very strong protest movement that puts the future of the government in question.

So there is an ongoing process throughout the region, which, like any revolutionary process in history, has ups and downs, periods of advances and periods of setbacks – and sometimes ambiguous periods. The most ambiguous event in the whole process until now has been the recent experience in Egypt where we saw this huge mass mobilisation against Morsi on 30 June, which was a very advanced experience in democracy by a mass movement asking for the recall of an elected president who had betrayed the promises he made to the people. But at the same time, and here lies the ambiguity of course, you had the military coup and widespread illusions that the army could play a progressive role, including amongst dominant sections of the broad left as well as amongst liberals.

**TC: So how does your analysis of the situation in Syria today fit into this overall framework of what is going**

**across the region?**

GA: There can be no doubt that what started in Syria in 2011 is part of the same revolutionary process alongside other countries. It is part of the same phenomenon and driven by the same basic causes – of stalled development, of unemployment and particularly youth unemployment. Syria is definitely no exception – in fact it's one of the most acute cases of social and economic crisis in the region. This came as a result of the neo-liberal policies implemented by the Assads – father and son, but especially by the son since he came to power a dozen years ago after his father's death.

Syria is a country which has seen massive impoverishment over the last decade, especially in the rural areas; the level of poverty has been rising and reached a situation where almost one third of the population were below the national poverty line, with unemployment on the rise. On the eve of the uprising the understated official figures for unemployment were 15% overall, and more than one third for young people between 15-24 years.

All this was taking place against a background of huge social inequality, a very corrupt regime – where Bashar Assad's cousin became the richest man in the country, controlling – it is widely believed – over half of the economy. And that's only one member of the ruling clan – all members of which were gaining huge material benefits. The clan functions as a real mafia, and has been ruling the country for several decades.

This constitutes the deep root of the explosion, in combination with the fact that the Syrian regime is one of the most despotic in the region. Compared to Assad's Syria, Mubarak's Egypt was a beacon of democracy and political freedom!

So it was no surprise that after Tunisia and Egypt, Libya, Yemen etc., Syria also went into the movement. And it was no surprise likewise, for those like me who were familiar with the character of the Syrian regime, that the movement could not achieve what it achieved in Tunisia and Egypt through mass demonstrations.

What is specific to this regime is that Assad's father has reshaped and reconstructed the state apparatus, especially its hard nucleus – the armed forces – in order to create a Pretorian guard for itself. The army, especially its elite forces, is tied to the regime itself in various ways, most prominently through the use of sectarianism. Even people who had never heard of Syria before know now that the regime is based on one minority in the country – about 10% of the population; the Alawites.

With a military that is completely loyal to the regime, any illusion (and there were many illusions in the movement at the beginning) that the regime could be overthrown merely through mass demonstrations was false. It was in a sense inevitable that the uprising would turn into a civil war because there is no way to overthrow a regime of this nature without a civil war.

In the history of revolutions, peaceful revolutions are actually the exception, not the rule. Most revolutions, if they didn't start with a civil war like the Chinese revolution, led very quickly to civil wars like the French, the Russian, etc.

This said, the Syrian regime is but one of the counter-revolutions that are facing the Syrian uprising, even though it is by far the deadliest. A second counterrevolution is constituted by the Gulf monarchies, the main bastion of reaction in the whole region. These monarchies reacted to the Arab uprising in the only way they could, especially given that their godfather, US imperialism, was not in a position to intervene as a counterrevolutionary force against the uprisings. They tried therefore to co-opt them, to recuperate the movement. And for the Gulf monarchies, this meant striving to turn social and democratic revolutions into movements led by forces which are no threat to them ideologically. That goes for the Muslim Brotherhood which was heavily backed by the Emirate of Qatar as well as for

## Syria between Revolution and Counter-Revolutions

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all sorts of Salafists – from the ‘moderate’ to the jihadists – backed by the Saudi kingdom or various Wahhabi-Salafi networks in the Gulf countries.

These monarchies have done their best to help and promote the outcome that is in their interests within the Syrian uprising; that is turning the democratic revolution – which would be a threat to them – into a sectarian war. Here you have an actual convergence between them and the first counterrevolution – that is the regime.

At the beginning what you had in Syria were demonstrations, like everywhere else in the region; organised and led by young people, networking through the social media, very brave mobilisations with clear social, democratic and anti-sectarian demands. But from day one the regime claimed that they were led by Al Qaeda, exactly like Gaddafi pretended in Libya; in both cases, that was a message addressed to the West. They were saying to Washington: ‘Make no mistake – we are your friends, we are fighting the same enemy, we are fighting Al Qaeda, so you shouldn’t stand against us, but support us instead’.

The Syrian regime did more than waging a propaganda war – it let jihadists out of its jails in order to boost the development of this current within the uprising. In the Syrian opposition there is a very widespread belief that that the Al Qaeda groups are infiltrated and manipulated by the regime. This is not a farfetched view actually – there is some level of involvement for sure, even if no one can tell how much.

Then, there is still a third counterrevolutionary force working against the Syrian uprising: it is of course the US – and I would add Israel. The US is counterrevolutionary in the full sense of the term with regard to Syria as it is in relation to all other countries in the region. Washington does not want any state to be dismantled. It wants what it calls ‘an orderly transition’; power changing hands but within a basic continuity of the state structure. In Washington and London, they keep talking about the ‘lessons of Iraq’ and explaining that they were wrong to dismantle the Ba’athist state. ‘We should have kept that state and just removed Saddam Hussein, and if we had done so we wouldn’t have faced so much trouble.’

You may ask: what about Libya? Well, before the fall of Gadhafi, I wrote a long piece explaining that NATO’s intervention in Libya was an attempt to co-opt the uprising, to steer it and manage it while they were involved in negotiations with Saif al-Islam, Gadhafi’s son, who was seen by the West as the good member of the ruling family. They wanted him to get his father to step down in his favour which would have very much suited Washington, London, Paris and the rest. But of course the Libyan uprising went beyond that when the insurrection in Tripoli led to the collapse of the whole regime.

For Syria, Washington very clearly says – even during the recent crisis over chemical weapons – ‘We don’t want the regime to be overthrown, we want a political solution’, what Obama also called a ‘Yemen solution’ one year ago. What did happen in Yemen? The President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, after one year of uprising, handed power with a big smile on his face to the vice-president and remained since then in the country where he still pulls many strings. This is just a mockery, a real frustration for the radical forces in that country. That’s also why it is far from over in Yemen, even if you don’t hear about it in the news here in the West. The movement is going on in Yemen, as it is in Bahrain and all over the region.

It is this sort of solution that the USA wants for Syria. It doesn’t want to intervene militarily like it did in Libya. The recent flare up was because Washington felt under pressure, with its ‘credibility’ at stake after Obama had set down his ‘red line’ regarding the use of chemical weapons. But even when they were contemplating strikes, they explained that they would be very limited strikes which would not affect the balance of forces. The *New York Times* ran a long article reporting that Israel wished exactly the same: limited strikes that wouldn’t alter the balance of forces within Syria.

Western powers would not lend substantial support – especially military support – to anyone, for they have no

confidence in any force among the opposition. As the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, put it in writing: ‘Syria today is not about choosing between two sides but rather about choosing one among many sides. It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favour. Today, they are not.’

**TC: You didn’t mention Russia when you talked about counter-revolutionary forces. Would it be accurate to describe them as the fourth column in this case?**

GA: I didn’t mention them because they are obviously a key force propping up the Assad regime. In that sense, Putin’s Russia is part of the first column, not a fourth one.

**TC: Is it not true that their involvement has not only an important material effect through their supply of arms to Assad but also an important ideological one in that they disorient some who you would expect to support the uprising?**

GA: In the final analysis, the Syrian uprising has very few friends. Even amongst people that one would expect to be friendly to revolutions you can see some hostile attitudes, people taken in by the propaganda of the Syrian regime which portrays the whole uprising as jihadist as well as that of Moscow. And some people look to Russia as if it were still the Soviet Union, even though in terms of its political and social character the United States appears as rather progressive compared to what Putin’s Russia is: an authoritarian government, wild capitalism, a flat income tax rate of 13%, robber barons, and so on. There is much more ground to consider Russia as an imperialist country than an anti-imperialist one.

As for those who believe that the Syrian regime is ‘anti-imperialist’, they just ignore the history of this regime and the sheer opportunism on which it bases its foreign policy. Assad’s Syria intervened in 1976 to crush the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese left in Lebanon and prevent their victory over the Lebanese far right. In the 1983-5, it waged or backed wars against the Palestinian camps in Lebanon. In 1991, the Syrian regime fought the war against Iraq under US command; it was part of the US-led coalition; from the 1990s until 2004, the Syrian regime was the protector of the neoliberal pro-US Hariri government in Lebanon; and during all these years, the Syrian border has been the quietest and safest of all Israel’s borders. So there is no sense in which the Syrian regime can be described as ‘anti-imperialist’: it is a very opportunist regime which does not hesitate to switch sides and alliances in order to further its own interests.

**TC: Could you say something about the balance of forces within the Syrian opposition?**

GA: From reports by friends whom I trust and who have visited all the areas controlled by the opposition, the two Al Qaeda groups represent no more than 10% of the fighters, while the Salafists probably represent about 30%. This leaves a majority of forces acting under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner, although part of them are also Islamic-leaning. This is the outcome of the fact that the main sources of funding for Syrian anti-regime forces have been Islamic and based in the Gulf, from the monarchies to various religious networks.

That’s talking about the armed groups – as for the popular resistance, in their vast majority people are not interested in any kind of Islamic state but in the democratic and social aspirations which have been the objectives of the uprising since it began.

**TC: Could you say something about how the resistance organises and what its main demands are?**

GA: The resistance is very heterogeneous. During the first months of the uprising, the original leaders were, as indeed they were everywhere else in the region, mostly young people networking through the internet. They

organised themselves through local coordination committees (LCCs) and elaborated a progressive programme: democratic, anti-sectarian, and secular-oriented. Overall a clearly progressive set of demands, which you could not fail to support if you are on the left.

The second stage was the constitution of the Syrian National Council (SNC) – abroad. This is a major difference with Libya where the National Transitional Council was formed inside the country and recognised as legitimate by most of the Libyan uprising, although even there, there were some problems. The SNC was formed abroad by people who had no real role in the leadership of the uprising itself, but had connections. It was created with the interference of Turkey, and that of Qatar. The Emirate funded the SNC, especially the Muslim Brotherhood who were and are still an important component of this official opposition in exile.

But in the same SNC you could find people who belong to the Syrian left like the People's Democratic Party, which originates in a split from the Syrian Communist Party. And the LCCs themselves got represented in the SNC and recognised its leadership of the opposition. Here again one can agree with the bulk of the SNC's programme from a left-wing point of view – it is democratic, anti-sectarian and broadly secular-oriented. Of course we could say it is not social enough but this is not at a radical left leadership, to be sure.

The SNC has now been superseded by the Syrian National Coalition. It remains basically a coalition of forces whose range is similar to that of the forces that were involved in the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings. One shouldn't forget that in Egypt a well, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists were there, in the uprising, along with liberals and the left. Then with the militarisation of the struggle, the mutation of the uprising into a civil war which happened progressively from the autumn of 2011 on, we have seen the emergence of hard-line Islamic jihadist groups including two groups working under the banner of Al Qaeda with differences between them, and Salafi groups. Of the two Al Qaeda affiliates, one has mostly fighters coming from outside Syria and the other is mainly Syrian and there are tensions between them. There have been increasing clashes between the FSA, the armed wing of the official opposition, and the Al Qaeda groups.

It is reassuring to see the hard-line jihadists being more and more rejected by the mainstream opposition but one also understands that the latter cannot wage a war on two fronts – they already have enough problems with the very unequal balance of forces between them and the regime. Unfortunately there is no left wing presence in the armed struggle. The radical left in Syria is anyway very marginal. And the broader left has not tried to organise separately within the FSA.

### **TC: How have the opposition responded to the regime's attempt to portray them as sectarian?**

GA: They have responded in various ways – through statements and proclamations, banners in demonstrations, using the names of Alawite or Christian or Druze figures from history for their Friday mobilisations, etc.

The fact is that there is no possible comparison between the sectarian killings that have been carried out by the regime and its shabbihas – its militias – who perpetrated most mass sectarian killings, and sectarian killings by anti-regime forces. The latter are mostly perpetrated by the jihadists, whom I consider as another counterrevolutionary force.

Of course there are wild reactions from people with poor political consciousness reacting in a sectarian way to the regime's brutality. Well, what do you expect? This is not an army of Marxist intellectuals facing the regime; it is a popular uprising, and without a political leadership able to educate the people. So there are sectarian actions on the part of the opposition in reaction to the massive sectarianism of the regime. We had the same in the Lebanese civil war with much higher symmetry in sectarian killings between both sides – if that were the criteria, everyone should have equally rejected both sides in the Lebanese civil war.

Of course we should denounce all sectarian acts whenever they happen – and they are actually denounced by the opposition and the FSA. But we shouldn't fall into the trap of ignoring the difference in scale between the regime's mass sectarian killings and those perpetrated by anti-regime forces.

### **TC: What is the relationship with the Kurdish struggle?**

GA: Both the regime and the opposition courted the Kurds at the beginning. The regime did this because it didn't want the Kurds to join the uprising, and the uprising did so because they wanted to get them on board. The SNC included in its programme the recognition of minority rights – not to the extent of acknowledging the right to self-determination – but then that's not even a unanimous demand of the Kurds in Syria, though of course I would be strongly in favour of defending this right.

The Syrian Kurdish movement seized the opportunity and took control of the Kurdish areas. The dominant force amongst the Syrian Kurds is linked to the PKK, which is dominant in the Turkish-controlled part of Kurdistan and has cultivated links with the Syrian regime over the years. But the Kurds are not directly interfering in the civil war; they are busy controlling their own area, establishing de facto autonomy like what happened in Iraq. I could hardly imagine they would lose this in the future – so that's an achievement for them. They keep some distance from the civil war apart from clashes with the jihadists every now and then.

### **TC: How would you describe the situation in the areas controlled by the FSA? Clearly the humanitarian situation is a disaster but how would you describe it politically?**

GA: Yes the humanitarian situation is definitely appalling. In many of the areas where the opposition has taken over and got rid of the Ba'athist state, we have seen the creation of local democratic committees, with some form of election. This is definitely positive, but it is somewhat normal when the authority disappears in a locality to try to organise something to replace it. One shouldn't portray such committees as 'soviets' or anything like that – that would be completely over the top. These structures can represent an interesting potential for the future, but for the time being they are but measures of self-organisation in order to replace a vacuum of power created by the collapse of local state agencies.

### **TC: How would you sum up what the left should be doing with regard to Syria?**

GA: It is really important to come out in solidarity with the Syrian uprising and not to be shy about it. If we believe in the right of people to self-determination, if we believe in the right of people to freely elect whoever they want, then even if we had an uprising where Islamic forces were leading, this shouldn't change our position – as it didn't for example with Gaza and Hamas, or with the Iraqi resistance which I would remind people was far more under Islamic control than anything you have in Syria.

For all these reasons I think that it is very important to express solidarity with the Syrian revolution, to build links with the progressives among the Syrian opposition, to counter the regime's propaganda as well as that of Moscow, and to denounce Washington's and the West's complicity in the crime against humanity that is perpetrated in Syria.

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