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Syria

# Ten years after the popular uprising in Syria

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**Ten years after the beginning of the Syrian popular uprising, the regime now rules over more than 70% of the country's territory. Assisted by Russia, Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah and other confessional and reactionary militias, Damascus has crushed the initial uprising and largely won what had progressively devolved into a regional and international war. However, the Syrian regime faces enormous socio-economic challenges which are far from being overcome.**

The situation is more than catastrophic for the popular classes in the country. The overall poverty rate is more than 85%. In February 2021, the United Nations World Food Programme estimated the number of Syrians suffering food insecurity to be 12.4 million, or nearly 60% of the population. More than half of the Syrian population is internally or externally displaced because of the war. There are more than 6.6 million refugees and more than 6.1 million internally displaced, while only a low proportion of refugees has returned to the country.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis in March 2020 has further intensified the critical socio-economic situation of the vast majority of Syrians. The Assad regime has also destroyed countless hospitals, leaving a dilapidated and underfunded healthcare system bereft of medicine and medical supplies, notably due to international sanctions. The destruction caused by the conflict, mostly due to the ravages of the repression by the Assad regime and its allies, is enormous, and is reflected in a spectacular fall in GDP, from US\$60.2 billion in 2010 to around 21.6 billion in 2019, while the total of accumulated economic losses during the conflict is estimated at US\$530.1 billion.

## Roots of the popular revolt

The roots of the popular revolt in Syria and more generally in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) reside in the absence of democracy and the failure of the region's political economy to meet the aspirations of the popular classes.

Bashar al-Assad consolidated the concentration of power in the hands of his family and its clique in the decade which preceded the explosion of the revolutionary crisis, with an acceleration of neoliberal policies which benefited the business sectors linked to the regime. For the lower classes, excluded from these spoils, this resulted in the migration of skilled labour and massive rates of unemployment and underemployment, especially among young people. The percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33% in 2010, which represented around 7 million people, while 30% were just above this level, as against 14% of Syrians living below the poverty line in 2000.

The growing impoverishment of the masses, in a climate of corruption and ever-increasing social inequality, paved the way for the popular uprising, which only needed a spark. This was provided by the popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. They encouraged the popular classes in other countries to rise up. In Syria, large sectors of the population took to the streets with the same demands made by other revolts: freedom, dignity, democracy, social justice, and equality.

In the early years of the uprising, the Syrian protest movement created alternative institutions to the existing state, following the collapse of state authority in some areas. The demonstrators created local coordinating committees and local councils, providing services to the local population, and coordinating the popular protest movement. In the liberated territories, the revolutionaries created a situation close to dual power, contesting the power of the regime. Of course, we should not romanticize this phase, there were limits. These new power structures did not represent a form of revolutionary social alternative to the existing political and economic structures of Syrian capitalism and had

limitations in terms of an alternative system of democratic autonomy. There were problems in particular concerning under-representation of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Nevertheless, the committees and councils succeeded in forming a political alternative which attracted broad sectors of the population.

At the same time, armed groups under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) grew through 2011 and 2012. Militarization was largely motivated by the regime's violent repression, pushing sectors of the opposition to resort to armed self-defence. The FSA never acted as a unified institution and was characterized by its pluralism in the early years of the uprising. However, this lack of centralization and of an entrenched political leadership to coordinate and federate the various armed groups of the FSA around a common political program very quickly became a problem and left the door open to manipulation of foreign countries. The FSA was gradually weakened and marginalized over the years in the face of the war and the repression by the Syrian regime (and sometimes attacks by jihadist groups), a lack of organized support, and the division of these networks into multiple distinct groups. With the weakening of FSA forces, the remaining groups turned into proxies of foreign states, especially Turkey in the north of the country, and/or fell under the domination of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

## The counter-revolutionary forces

These democratic organs were progressively undermined by several counter-revolutionary forces. The first and foremost was of course Assad's despotic regime, which aimed to crush the uprising militarily. This regime remains the most important threat to Syria's popular classes. The resilience of the regime was rooted in the mobilization of its popular base through sectarian, tribal, regional, and clientelist connections, as well as in the massive foreign support of its allies.

The second counterrevolutionary force was the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist military organizations. They did not have the same destructive capacities as Assad's state apparatus, but they radically opposed the initial demands and objectives of the uprising, attacked democratic elements of the protest movement, and sought to impose a new authoritarian and exclusive political system.

Finally, the regional powers and imperialist international states formed the third force of counter-revolution. The assistance provided by the allies of Damascus, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, in addition to foreign Shi'a fundamentalist militias sponsored by Tehran, provided the regime with crucial political, economic, and military support that enabled it to survive.

These regional forces viewed the protest movement in Syria and the possible fall of the Assad regime as a threat to their geopolitical interests. As they increased their influence over the country's society and state, Tehran and Moscow in particular became more invested in the regime's survival, the exploitation of the country's natural resources and the extension of their economic influence in the country.

Against these players, the so called "Friends of Syria" (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) formed another international force of counter-revolution. They supported most of the reactionary Islamic fundamentalist groups, helped transform the uprising into a sectarian or ethnic war, and at every step opposed the democratic uprising out of fear of it as a potential threat to their own autocratic regimes.

The Western states led by the USA also did not want to see any radical change in Syria and rejected any plans to aid the progressive armed forces fighting to topple Assad. US policy has been focused on regime stabilization and carrying out the so-called "War on Terror" against ISIS.

Despite the divisions between the various regional and international players, they were all united in opposition to the uprising and all aimed to prevent its spread beyond the country's borders.

# The question of Rojava and the Syrian revolution

At the start of the eruption of the revolutionary process in Syria in March 2011, Kurdish protesters initially organized themselves in a similar fashion to other parts of the country through the creation of Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and other groups of young people from different components of the Syrian population. However, the collaboration between the various Arab and Kurdish coordination committees gradually weakened, before coming to an end, due to the growing divisions within the popular protest movement and the deepening disagreements with the Syrian Arab opposition groups, as well as the rise of Arab and Kurdish ethnic tensions over the years and the gradual transformation of the popular uprising into an armed conflict.

For its part, the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD or Democratic Union Party), which historically and ideologically emerged from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) created in Turkey, with the initial benevolence of the Syrian regime, has gained increased control over the Kurdish political arena in Syria. Damascus needed all of its armed forces to quell protests in the rest of the country and did not want to open a new military front, although it maintained a limited presence in some cities, such as Qamishli and Hasakah.

The PYD was also able to take advantage of the divisions between the various regional and international actors intervening in Syria, in particular by receiving assistance from the United States (and to a lesser extent from Russia) to advance its own political interests. However, this support from foreign players waned over time, or at least seemed less solid. The autonomy of the PYD over large areas of north-eastern Syria has become a frequent point of contention between many local and regional actors, in particular Erdogan's Turkey which continues its war against Kurdish self-determination in the neighbouring countries.

This was particularly manifested during the armed invasion by the Turkish armed forces, assisted by Syrian armed opposition groups, mainly Islamic fundamentalists, gradually falling completely into the pay of the Ankara government, against the Afrin region in January 2018. Almost 200,000 people were forced from their homes as a result of the Turkish military operation and subsequent occupation, while human rights violations continue against local populations. In October 2019, Turkey launched a new military operation, comforted by the fact that the US government would not challenge it on the ground. Its objective was to oust the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by the PYD, from the Turkish border strip and to establish a so-called "security zone" there, where it also planned to move and resettle a part of the Syrian refugee population currently residing in Turkey.

At the same time, Damascus refuses to grant any form of concession to the PYD-dominated authorities in the northeast, in particular any form of minimal autonomy. The hostile rhetoric of the Syrian state media and the political manoeuvring of the Syrian regime against the SDF has on the contrary grown steadily since then, increasingly undermining its autonomy.

The PYD thus seized the uprising as an opportunity to become the dominant Kurdish political actor in Syria. The areas ruled by the PYD have been praised for their inclusion and participation of women in all sectors of society, including military struggle, secularization of laws and institutions and, to some extent, integration and participation of various ethnic and religious minorities. However, the authoritarian practices of PYD forces against rival Kurdish political actors and activists from other communities have been criticized. Likewise, certain discriminatory and/or security practices against segments of the Arab population in certain areas under its control have been the source of criticism.

## Subjective weaknesses on the left

The various counter-revolutionary actors all helped crush the Syrian uprising. While we should not shy away from blaming the defeat on these forces, we must also examine and criticize the mistakes and shortcomings of the Syrian opposition.

One of the most important problems in the opposition was the mistaken alliance pursued by democrats and some leftists with the Muslim Brotherhoods and other Islamic fundamentalist groups and their international backers, which opposed the basic democratic demands of the uprising, especially those of women, oppressed religious minorities, and ethnic groups. This mistaken alliance helped shatter the inclusiveness of the initial popular movement in Syria. These shortcomings were present prior to the uprising but appeared more clearly with it.

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The various leftist groups were too weak after decades of repression at the hands of the regime to constitute an organized democratic and progressive independent pole. As a result, the opposition to Assad failed to present a viable political alternative that could galvanize the popular classes and oppressed groups.

The failure to address the questions stands out in particular on two main issues: women and Kurds. In both cases, wide sectors of the Syrian opposition reproduced discriminatory and exclusionary policies against these groups, alienating key forces that would have been crucial to unite against the regime.

To win against the Assad regime the opposition would have had to combine struggles against autocracy, exploitation and oppression. If it had raised democratic demands as well as demands in the interests of all workers and those for Kurdish self-determination and women's liberation it would have been in a much stronger position to build much deeper and more extensive solidarity among the social forces in the Syrian revolution.

Another weakness of the opposition was the weak development of mass class organization and progressive political organization. The revolts in Tunisia and Sudan demonstrate the importance of mass trade union organizations such as the Tunisian UGTT and the Sudanese Professional Associations in cohering successful mass struggle.

Similarly, feminist mass organizations have been of particular significance in Tunisia and Sudan for promoting women's rights and winning democratic and socio-economic rights, even if they remain fragile and not fully consolidated. Syrian revolutionaries did not have these organized forces in place or at the same level of mass organizations, weakening the movement, and they will be essential to construct for future struggles.

## What perspectives for Syria?

The popular uprising that began in Syria in 2011, like those in the MENA region, is a long-term protracted revolutionary process. It can go through phases of strong popular mobilizations and defeats, followed by new revolutionary uprisings. In Syria, the conditions that led to the popular uprising are still present, and the regime has not only been unable to resolve them but has in fact exacerbated them.

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Damascus and other regional capitals believe they can maintain their despotic dominance by continuously resorting to massive violence against their populations. This is doomed to fail, and we can expect further outbursts of popular protests.

Despite the support of its foreign allies, the Assad regime, for all its resilience, faces intractable problems. Its failure to address the country's serious socio-economic problems, combined with its relentless crackdown, has sparked criticism and further protests.

During 2020 and at the beginning of 2021, various demonstrations took place to denounce the economic problems and the high cost of living. However, these conditions do not automatically translate into political opportunities, especially after more than nine years of destructive and murderous warfare. The absence of a structured, independent, democratic, progressive and inclusive Syrian political opposition, which could attract the popular classes, made it difficult for various sectors of the population to unite and challenge the regime again and at the national level.

This is the main challenge. In difficult conditions of repression, intense pauperization and social dislocation, a progressive political alternative must nevertheless be organized within the local expression of this resistance.

*March 2021*

*PS:*

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