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Syria:

'The joy... is accompanied by caution and fear'

- Features -

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Munif Mulhem is a comrade of the Fourth International who lives in Damascus. A militant in Syria's Communist Action Party, he was imprisoned for 17 years in the dreadful prison of Palmyra. He never gave up his fight against the dictatorship and was arrested again five years ago, but fortunately was released after a few months. Mireille Court contacted him by telephone to get his first impressions of the upheavals under way in Syria.

The fall of the Assad regime was greeted with joy and enthusiasm by the Syrian people, throughout the 10 days of the offensive by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and in the towns conquered on the road to Damascus.

Yes, the Syrian people welcomed the fall of the Assad regime with great joy. This regime ruled Syria for more than half a century with an unrivalled dictatorship. The last decade of its rule resulted in the destruction of people and buildings, displaced almost half its population inside and outside Syria, killed or had killed more than half a million of its inhabitants, and this brutal regime subjected a large proportion of its citizens to all kinds of torture, humiliation, poverty and deprivation of the most basic elements of life. I was arrested along with four of my brothers and two of my sisters-in-law, and we spent a total of more than half the years in detention during the time of Assad senior.

After the revolution, the regime looted and burnt down our house in 2011, an old antique house dating back to the first quarter of the last century, from where we were displaced, and I was arrested, along with many sons and daughters of my family. What happened to us is perhaps far less than what has happened to thousands of Syrian families who have lost their children in detention or as a result of the regime's violence and the massacres it has committed over the last half-century of its rule. As for the impression that there are supporters of the regime, this is true, but in reality they do not exceed 20% of the Syrian people, and most of them are either owners of interests linked to the regime's mafias, or sectarian or national minorities whose conscience has been ruined by the regime and aided by the armed Islamic forces because the revolution against it threatens their lives.

Why did the Syrian army collapse without a fight?

From the very first days of the revolution, the army began to disintegrate by defecting or fleeing, fearing for their lives from a conflict in which they have no interest. By the end of 2018, the only coherent unit left in the army was the Fourth Division under the command of Maher al-Assad, which relied more on recruiting *shabbiha* (mercenary hitmen hired by the regime) to fight than on its own members, who were busy looting and collecting tribute at checkpoints. The Republican Guard is responsible for protecting the presidential palace and its annexes in Damascus. The rest of the army is mainly made up of new recruits and Iranian militias, led by Hezbollah. Most of them have been withdrawn to Lebanon.

Generally speaking, morale has become low because of the length of the war and the lack of attention paid to food and weapons. This has led to the image we saw when the military factions advanced under the auspices of and with the support of Turkey.

The Western media only talk about HTS and never mention the Syrian National Army, paid for and armed by Turkey, which is advancing into Rojava while committing massacres. What influence could the SNA have in the development of the situation?

If HTS's mission is to overthrow the Assad regime, the military factions formed by Turkey in the north from the Syrian

military factions that withdrew from all the military zones facing the regime, the mission of these factions is to confront the Kurdish forces, which Turkey considers to be the greatest threat on its borders. As a result, I don't think they will play any role other than the one assigned to them by Turkey. They won't have much of a role to play in the fate of the new Syria, other than that of a Turkish pressure card on the real winners in Syria.

HTS leader AI-Jolani presents himself as a changed man. Do you trust him and HTS to restore a form of democracy in Syria?

Neither I nor most of the Syrians who rejoiced at the fall of the regime at the hands of al-Jolani trust the variables and assurances that al-Jolani gives to the Syrians. The joy that engulfed Syrians with the fall of the Assad regime is accompanied by caution and fear in the future for democracy and freedoms that have been launched since the beginning of the revolution because of the strong presence of al-Jolani.

Some experts claim that all this is a continuation of the 2011 revolution, can we believe them?

Since the beginning of the revolution, especially after its fourth year, many Syrians have considered the Salafist/jihadist military factions as counter-revolutionary forces, and the last few years have shown that the population of northern Syria rejects the HTS.

The demonstrations against al-Jolani in Idlib this year, demanding his downfall, are proof of this.

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