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Syria

The new balance of terror in Syria

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The scorched-earth war of the Assad dictatorship, backed by allies Russia and Iran, against the Syrian Revolution has attained a critical victory with the conquest of the rebellion stronghold of Eastern Aleppo. Now the left must place a premium on understanding the lessons of what happened and what it will mean for the region. Ashley Smith interviewed Daher about conditions in Syria and the situation for the remnants of revolutionaries after Aleppo, as well as the role that Hezbollah, Lebanon's Shia fundamentalist party, has played.

AS: After the conquest of Aleppo, Assad's counterrevolution seems to have decisively set back the Syrian Revolution. What impact will this have on the remnants of genuine revolutionaries? Also, how have the Islamic fundamentalist forces that came to predominate in the opposition to Assad's regime responded?

JD: The loss of Eastern Aleppo is, of course, a big blow for the various opposition forces, but especially for the democratic opposition forces. The regime and its allies targeted Eastern Aleppo because of its political and economic significance.

We must remember today that the Syrian Revolution began as a mass popular uprising against the dictatorship. Just like everywhere in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the people rose up for democracy and liberation. And in Syria, the people liberated whole sections of the country from Assad's regime.

The revolution faced both Assad's counterrevolution, backed by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, as well as a counterrevolution waged by Islamic fundamentalist forces like al-Qaeda's Nusra Front, now renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey backed many of the fundamentalist forces, while the U.S. tried to manipulate and steer the rebellion into an orderly transition to preserve the regime without Assad, although they have progressively abandoned even this position.

Eastern Aleppo was the most significant of all the liberated cities that had begun to create a popular democratic alternative to the dictatorship. The regime has most feared progressive and democratic organizations and activists, even with all their imperfections.

All the global and regional powers also want to liquidate the Syrian revolution's democratic aspirations in the name of the "war on terror." Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. elections will most likely lead to some grand coalition to prosecute this aim.

Tragically, each defeat of the democratic resistance has strengthened and benefited the Islamic fundamentalist forces on the ground. The fall of Aleppo has produced the same results. But this time, it has also produced splits and conflicts between different Islamic fundamentalist forces in the countryside around Idlib and Aleppo.

On January 23, Fateh al-Sham, the former al-Qaeda affiliate, launched attacks on armed opposition groups, first on the [Free Syrian Army, or FSA] coalition of Jaysh al-Mujahideen and then other Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and Suqur al-Sham.

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Fateh al-Sham justified this new offensive as preemptive acts to "thwart conspiracies" against it by the armed opposition forces attending the negotiations held in Kazakhstan. In response, several armed opposition groups, including other Islamic fundamentalist movements, expelled Fateh al-Sham from areas around Aleppo and Idlib.

In a defensive move, Jaysh al-Mujahideen and six other armed opposition groups announced their merger with Ahrar Sham in northwestern Syria in order to fend off the assault by Fateh al-Sham. A few days later, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham responded by announcing the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition composed of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zinki and three other Islamic factions.

The establishment of the two rival coalitions was accompanied by a series of defections from Ahrar a-Sham to HTS, including Abu Jaber Hashem al-Shakh, the former general commander of Ahrar a-Sham. Since then, dozens of armed opposition battalions and their leaders have chosen a side, either merging with Ahrar a-Sham or HTS.

Since the mergers, infighting was nearly completely ended, continuing only through propaganda and official statements. The unaligned Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades are pressured to join one of the two coalitions, at the risk of being repressed if they don't.

The local populations, which have long opposed the fundamentalists, have expressed anger about these internal clashes, and many even staged protests calling for an end to them.

The future of the struggle for liberation against the regime by Arabs, Kurds and others for a better Syria is getting darker every day, and there are no grounds for optimism in the short term. Nevertheless, even in these dire circumstances, there remain some local and democratic popular struggles against both the regime and its reactionary Islamic fundamentalist opponents.

AS: What will be the likely outcome of the Russian-backed negotiations? What is the role of the various imperial and regional powers in imposing a settlement and could it hold?

JD: First of all , it is important to say that these negotiations are really between different wings of the counterrevolution. On one side, you have Assad's regime and its backers, Russia and Iran.

On the other, you have Turkey, along with armed opposition groups, both the FSA networks and Islamic fundamentalist groups. Mohammed Alloush, a representative of Jaysh al-Islam, a Salafist group supported by Saudi Arabia, is leading them.

Turkey has reached a rapprochement with Moscow and no longer demands the departure of Bashar al-Assad. Now it is solely focused on preventing any form of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria.

The democratic and civilian components of the popular movement are completely sidelined in the negotiations, and with that, so are the initial objectives of the revolution for democracy, social justice and equality.

There have been no clear outcomes from the negotiations in Kazakhstan, despite a public relations coup for the three powers sponsoring the talks. They reaffirmed and reasserted their influence in Syria and on various actors in the country.

Assad, Russia and Iran have successfully recast their counterrevolution as a fight against "terrorism" in Syria. Turkey

has now joined that chorus, as has the U.S. under Trump.

In a new development, Russia and Turkey are now engaged in joint military acts. At the end of December, Russian jets assisted Turkish military forces and its allies in attacking ISIS targets around the northern Syrian town of al-Bab. In mid January, the Russian and Turkish air forces conducted their first joint air operation to strike ISIS fighters in the suburbs of al-Bab.

Even the U.S. backed the Syria peace talks in Astana and hoped they would produce a settlement. There is now, and has been for a while, a near consensus between all international and regional powers around some key points: to liquidate the remnants of the revolutionary popular movement; stabilize the regime in Damascus and retain Bashar al-Assad at least for the short to medium term; oppose Kurdish autonomy; and wage joint war to defeat ISIS and Fateh al-Sham.

I don't think any real change on the ground can occur without the departure of Assad and his clique. Without, there is unlikely to be an end of the war, let alone any kind of transition towards a democratic system.

As a result, the war will likely continue in some form, with a catastrophic impact on Syrian civilians. Assad's regime and its allies will continue to crush everything opposing them.

AS: What's your explanation for why so many left and antiwar organizations have betrayed the Syrian Revolution?

JD:Some sections of the left and antiwar organizations have analyzed the Syrian revolutionary process only in geopolitical terms. They looked at it from above, as a contest between various states, and ignored the revolution from below entirely.

Of course, imperial and regional powers did intervene in the revolution for their own purposes. On one side, the Western states, Gulf monarchies and Turkey attempted manipulate and use the uprising.

On the other, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah backed Assad to the hilt. Much of the left wrongly considered the latter an "anti-imperialist" bloc. This analysis led some to deny or ignore the revolutionary dynamic.

The truth, however, is that the Syrian Revolution was not a cat's paw of other powers. It began as a genuine mass movement from below for the overthrow of the regime and for freedom and dignity, just like all the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa.

Sections of the left that discount the revolution and only see it as a contest between imperialism and so-called anti-imperialism ignore the fact that the major powers allegedly opposed to Assad have also collaborated with him. For example, Assad and the U.S. collaborated during the so-called "war on terror." Turkey and Qatar enjoyed very close relations with Syria's regime before the uprising. And Saudi Arabia was the main foreign investor in the country before 2011.

And after the revolution started, the U.S. was not committed to regime change, but an orderly transition to preserve the regime minus Assad. But the U.S. even abandoned this stance, striking de facto collaboration with Assad against ISIS.

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Both sides of the imperial and regional rivalry share one commitment in common—the defeat of the popular revolution in Syria and throughout the region. The last thing any of them want is radical democracy anywhere in the Middle East.

So many sections of the left dismissed the Syrian Revolution. That only intensified after the expansion of ISIS and its terrorist attacks in Europe and Turkey. Since then, the right and this section of the "left" agree on the need to preserve Assad's regime and the other dictatorships in the region in order to defeat ISIS.

Ironically, this puts both the right and this section of the "left" in agreement with the Trump administration and American imperialism. So much for the so-called anti-imperialist left's anti-imperialism!

The various imperialist and regional powers' adoption of this so-called realist policy toward Assad in the hopes of getting rid of ISIS will fail. We have to remember that Assad and the other powers fueled the development of ISIS and similar sister organizations.

They emerged as the result of authoritarian regimes crushing popular movements linked to the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The interventions of regional and international states have contributed to ISIS's development as well.

Finally, neoliberal policies that have impoverished the popular classes, together with the repression of democratic social and trade union forces, have been key in providing ISIS and Islamic fundamentalist forces the space to grow.

The left must understand that only by getting rid of these conditions can we resolve the crisis. That means we have to side with the democratic and progressive groups on the ground fighting to overthrow authoritarian regimes, defeat the counterrevolutionary Islamic fundamentalists, and replace neoliberalism with a more egalitarian social order in Syria and the region.

But there is a deeper problem on much of the left that predates the Syrian uprising. Too many who call themselves socialists looked to states like Stalin's Russia in the past or other similar regimes today as either representatives of a better society, or at least as opponents of American imperialism.

That led them to turn a blind eye to those societies' structures of exploitation and oppression. And in the cases of China and Russia today, it leads them to deny the reality of those societies' capitalist and imperialist policies.

I think what is at stake on the left is how we understand socialism, anti-imperialism and solidarity. As leftists, I believe our support must go to the revolutionary people struggling for freedom and emancipation from below, and not authoritarian and capitalist states, or any regional and international imperialists.

Only through their own collective action can workers and oppressed people achieve their goals. This concept, which is at the heart of revolutionary politics, tragically faces profound skepticism on some sections of the left. This is the real problem, and it must be overcome by a new generation of socialists.

AS: What should Syrian radicals do now to prepare for the next round of struggle in the coming years?

JD: First Syrian radicals should call for an end to the war, which has created terrible suffering. It has led to massive displacement of people within the country and driven millions out of it as refugees. The war only benefits the

counterrevolutionary forces on all sides.

From both a political and humanitarian perspective, the end of the war in Syria is an absolute necessity. It is the only way to give space for the democratic and progressive forces to reorganize and return to playing a leading role in the struggle for a new and democratic Syria.

Likewise, we must reject all the attempts to legitimize Assad's regime, and we must oppose all agreements that enable it to play any role in the country's future. A blank check given to Assad today will encourage future attempts by other authoritarian states to crush their populations if they came to revolt.

Assad and his various partners in the regime must be held accountable for their crimes. The same goes for the Islamic fundamentalist forces and other armed groups.

We need to gather and unite the democratic and progressive actors and movements against both sides of the counterrevolution—the regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents. We have to build an independent front based on opposition to all forms of discrimination.

We have to rekindle the popular movement for radical change of society from below. We have to rebuild coalitions like "al-Watan," established in February 2012 by 14 progressive and democratic organizations.

It was involved in the popular movement to overthrow the regime and replace it with a democratic state. The regime repressed it and it has since disappeared. But it is a precedent on which we can rebuild the mass movement in the coming years.

AS: Your new book on Hezbollah is a case study of one of the most important of forces of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. What is Hezbollah's project, and what role has it played in Lebanon and regionally?

JD: Lebanon's Hezbollah is one of the most important Shia fundamentalist parties in the Middle East. It has been supported by Iran since its official establishment in 1985. It follows the theory of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist—Wilāyat al-Faqāh—established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first of the Supreme Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran that hold ultimate political power in the country.

Hezbollah officials have repeatedly declared that Wilāyat al-Faqāh is not a political stand that can be subjected to revision. Membership to Hezbollah is conditional on allegiance to the Wilāyat al-Faqāh.

The level of Iranian financial support today is difficult to determine because it is largely channeled through non-governmental routes. Estimates, however, range from between \$100 million and \$400 million a year.

Hezbollah receives funding directly from the Wilāyat al-Faqāh himself. The Iranian Supreme Leader has sole control of the distribution of these funds to Hezbollah, and this is why it is largely unaffected by changes of governments in Iran.

Hezbollah's initial objective was to establish an Islamic regime, despite the near impossibility of such a task given the multi-confessional reality of Lebanese society.

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At first, it rejected the sectarian system that divided up power between different religious groupings in Lebanon. But it abandoned that stance to become one of the main players in the country's sectarian system today.

Hezbollah's evolution was linked to various factors, including the new political leaders that succeeded Khomeini, who sought to improve relations with the Western and Gulf states; the development of Hezbollah as a mass party that was no longer primarily composed of young radical clerics and individuals who sought to impose a model similar to Iran; and, finally, Hezbollah's need to protect its armaments and its growing political and economic interests inside Lebanon.

The class composition of Hezbollah's leadership also changed. A new fraction of the Shia bourgeoisie in Lebanon and in the diaspora became increasingly influential inside the party. And the upper echelons of the middle class involved in liberal professions were also playing a growing role within the party.

With this change, Hezbollah became increasingly integrated into the existing economic and political system. It has turned to various clientelist practices and become trapped in the typical corruption of Lebanon's establishment parties.

Hezbollah now represents a section of elite Shia interests against other bourgeois fractions, especially the one gathered around Rafic Hariri and, after his assassination, his son, Saad Hariri. The latter led the March 14 Alliance, which was supported by the Gulf and Western states, particularly after Syria's withdrawal from the country in 2005.

The political opposition of Hezbollah to the Hariris' March 14 Alliance should be understood as inter-capitalist rivalry on the national scale, between two blocs linked to different regional and international forces. Despite their rivalries, however, these two blocs have joined a government of national unity.

Thus, Hezbollah does not constitute a challenge to Lebanon's sectarian political system, nor its neoliberal capitalist system. On the contrary, it sees this system in much the same way as any other sectarian political party – as a means to serve its own interests.

And it has collaborated with other elites against various social and political forces that attempt to overcome sectarian divisions among the country's popular classes in the fight for a more egalitarian order in Lebanon.

AS: How has it used its opposition to Israel as a means to consolidate its position in Lebanese society?

JD: One of the key reasons for the emergence of Hezbollah was Israel's new invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Two things contributed to its rise: the Amal party's suspension of its resistance after Israel's first withdrawal in 1985; and the Syrian regime's repression of nationalist and communist forces.

That left the door open for Hezbollah to position itself as the sole resistance movement. The Syrian and Iranian regimes bolstered its position with massive support. The Ta'if agreement, which formalized the end to Lebanon's civil war in 1989, acknowledged Hezbollah as the sole military resistance to Israel.

Hezbollah's armed capabilities have played an important role in the diffusion of the party's political ideas, and its struggle against the Israeli occupation and its incursion into Lebanon brought huge popularity to it.

Hezbollah's military prowess is also perceived by large sections of the Shia popular and middle classes as a form of

compensation for their historic, political and economic deprivation. This gives the party a critical instrument of communal leverage in the Lebanese sectarian political system.

Today, any plan that seeks to disarm the resistance will be construed as a form of communal disempowerment for the Shia and would be strongly opposed. This feeling was only strengthened with the rise of Sunni jihadist forces in the region in the last few years.

Hezbollah's military and security apparatus has been a key and central element in the development of the party. Its purpose today is clearly to guarantee the party's political position in the sectarian political status quo and its economic interests in the Lebanon's neoliberal economic system.

At the same time, its armed wing also serves other purposes, such as the defense of the Islamic movement against any attempts to weaken it, the repression of dissent within the Shia population, and the intimidation of other Lebanese forces that might challenge it.

It plays the role of the "police" to guarantee security in some Shia-populated areas as well as an "army" to prosecute various interests in foreign countries.

AS: What has Hezbollah done in Syria? And what impact has that had on its base inside Lebanon and its reputation in the broader Middle East?

JD: Since the end of 2011, Hezbollah has intervened to fight alongside the Syrian regime's armed forces against the popular uprising. Its fighters have played an important role in several of the regime's military confrontations.

Hezbollah sent its veteran commanders to lead the less experienced Syrian regular troops in street fighting. They also took care of the training of some pro-regime militias known as "popular committees" that became paramilitary auxiliaries of the regime called National Defense Forces. They also established Syrian Shia militias that engaged in all sorts of sectarian attacks.

Hezbollah justified its military intervention as a way of defending Palestine and the resistance against Israel. Of course, this was a lie.

At the same time, it presented the struggle in Syria to its Lebanese Shia base as an "existential battle" against the Sunni extremists they called "takfiris." It found fertile ground for this idea among the Shia in Lebanon, especially after Sunni jihadists launched a wave of sectarian attacks in the country beginning in 2013.

This discourse was an important part of its legitimation of its counterrevolutionary intervention in Syria. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has enflamed the level of sectarianism between Sunni and Shia communities in Lebanon.

The growing insecurity in Shia areas, the intensified sectarianism in Lebanon and Middle East, and the massive casualties suffered by Hezbollah fighters in Syria have provoked dissatisfaction among sections of Lebanese Shia and even in Hezbollah's membership.

But Hezbollah's hegemony over Shia has meant that vocal criticisms have been limited. A majority of the Shia population still remains strongly supportive of, and reliant on, Hezbollah.

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No one has managed to organize an effective alternative to Hezbollah and Lebanon's other sectarian parties. So most in the Shia population believe that in the current situation a weakened Hezbollah would weaken the Shia more generally. They do not trust the Lebanese state and army to guarantee their security against jihadist forces.

Indeed, the party has been successful in recruiting large number of new members from Lebanon's Shia population to meet the growing requirements for manpower in Syria. The large majority of Hezbollah's popular base is now convinced that the movement's survival depends on its ability to assist the Syrian regime to remain in power.

That does not mean that Hezbollah's dominance among Lebanese Shias is stable. It faces real contradictions between its proclaimed support of the "oppressed of the world" and "resistance" on one hand, and its backing of Lebanese neoliberalism, the country's ruling class and Assad's brutal regimes on the other. These contradictions will pose challenges for it to maintain its popular base.

Any truly emancipatory project requires a rupture with the sectarian and bourgeois Lebanese political system, which Hezbollah and other establishment parties defend. These criticisms of Hezbollah can be applied to authoritarian regimes in the region and other Islamic fundamentalist movements in their own political context.

Despite all the challenges in this counterrevolutionary period, we must seek to rebuild large movements in Lebanon and elsewhere that unite people against oppression of any group, overcome sectarian divisions, and challenge the region's existing political and social order.

We have to connect democratic and social demands with opposition to all the imperialist and regional states. We have to build a new progressive politics based on the idea that the masses of people are the agents of their own emancipation. There is no other alternative.

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