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**Syria:**

# **The Syrian people will not submit, nor the permanent popular revolution**

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**The resistance of the Syrian people has continued to grow since the beginning of the revolutionary process in March 2011. Its struggle is taking place in the context of the popular struggles in Tunisia and Egypt and has extended to other countries in the region.**

The terrible repression against the Syrian population continues. Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory of the Rights of Man announced on August 23 that at least 24,495 people have met violent deaths since the beginning of the revolution, including a total of 17,281 civilians, while 6,163 soldiers have been killed, as well as 1,051 deserters who had joined the insurgency. We must add to this sad news some 1.5 million people who have been displaced inside the country and some 250,000 refugees in neighbouring countries.

## Self-organization of the popular movement

Contrary to what some people have said, the popular movement in Syria has not withdrawn from the streets, the universities and the workplaces, despite the many-sided and violent repression, on both political and military levels, of the regime.

Since the beginning of the revolution the main forms of organisation have been popular committees at the level of villages, neighbourhoods, cities and regions. These popular committees are the real backbone of the movement, mobilizing the people for demonstrations. They have also developed forms of self-management based on the organization of the masses in the areas liberated from the yoke of the regime. Popular elected councils have emerged to deal with and manage the liberated areas, proving that it is the regime that causes anarchy and not the people.

The establishment of civil administrations in the zones that have been liberated from the armed forces of the regime has also taken place due to the absence of the state, in order to exercise its prerogatives in many areas, such as schools, hospitals, roads, water, electricity and communications services. These civil administrations are established through elections and popular consensus and have major tasks for the provision of public services, as cited above, security and civil peace.

The universities have also been important centres of popular resistance. The University of Aleppo, which has been a spearhead of the protest in the city since the beginning of the demonstrations in March 2011, witnessed major student demonstrations last May, and also earlier on. They were violently repressed by the security forces, which killed four people and arrested hundreds of others. The University of Aleppo also suspended its courses during the months of May and June for fear of an even bigger uprising of young people, while at the University of Homs bullets are more common than books. The voices and the songs of the students at the University of Damascus are often heard in the Presidential Palace, which is only a hundred yards away, while almost daily demonstrations take place in the universities of Deraa and Deir Al-Zor.

Students represent a quarter of all the martyrs in Syria since the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, according to the Union of Free Students of Syria (UFSS). Founded on September 29, 2011 to fight against the regime, in the life of the student movement the union is a bastion of political resistance and of the fight for a democratic society. The union organises free student demonstrations and popular resistance in universities across the country. The UFSS also played a major role in the campaign of strikes and civil disobedience in January and February 2012.

A free Syrian teachers' union also emerged in January 2012, declaring its support for the Syrian revolution and its commitment to restructure universities in order to turn them into beacons of science, justice and freedom. The union also adds that it is determined to purge the universities of the corruption of the regime and the security services.

It is in fact important to remember that the universities were the main sectors of society, along with the army, on which the regime imposed near-total control. It banned all political activities, except for the Ba'ath party. This party was the only political organization that had the right to organise events, conferences and public demonstrations on university campuses or military barracks or even to publish and distribute a newspaper within the universities and the army.

Even the political parties allied with the regime in the National Progressive Front did not have the right to organize, conduct propaganda or have the slightest official presence in these institutions.

In the same way the regime imposed its domination over the trade union bureaucracy, and this has hindered and blocked the fight against the neoliberal and authoritarian policies carried out by the regime, particularly since the 2000 decade. Since then the standard of living of the majority of the population has continued to fall, while political repression has continued. For example, in May 2006, hundreds of workers in a public construction company in Damascus protested and clashed with security forces. At the same time taxi drivers were on strike in Aleppo to protest against their living and working conditions.

The working population has also been repressed during the revolution. During the month of December 2011, successful campaigns of civil disobedience and general strikes took place in Syria. They crippled large parts of the country, showing that the mobilization of the working class and the exploited is right at the heart of the Syrian revolution. It is for this reason that the dictatorship, seeking to break the dynamic of the contestation, sacked more than 85,000 workers between January 2011 and February 2012 and closed 187 factories (according to official figures).

We can see that the Syrian revolutionary process is a popular and democratic movement that mobilizes the exploited and oppressed classes against the capitalist elite which is linked to the world order (in a very similar way to their counterparts across the Arab world).

Is it necessary to recall the neoliberal measures undertaken by this regime, measures which have impoverished society and weakened the Syrian economy? Sixty per cent of the Syrian population live below the poverty line or just above it. Is it necessary to recall that the Assad clan, especially around the person of Rami Makhlouf, through the process of privatization, has cornered more than 60 per cent of the economic wealth of Syria?

## **From economic centralism to an unrestrained and corrupt capitalism**

The coming to power of Hafez Al-Assad in 1970 was praised and welcomed with great joy by the big bourgeoisie in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Moreover the beginning of the "corrective movement" initiated by Al-Assad also put an end to the radical policies of the 1960s, which had challenged capital and the political power of this big bourgeoisie. The objective of the Assad regime was in fact to ensure the stability of the regime, to ensure security for capital accumulation and to placate the powerful sectors of the business community, whose role has been growing steadily and more powerfully.

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With the coming to power of Hafez Al-Assad a clientelist and authoritarian regime was established, where large-scale corruption of government officials and soldiers was used to ensure their loyalty.

Thanks to this generalized corruption, the state became a real machine making possible the accumulation of considerable sums of money, a real cash cow for the nomenklatura and especially for the close circle of the dictator, his family and his most loyal lieutenants. Informal networks of cronyism between the state apparatus and the business community multiplied, giving rise to a class of new bourgeois rentiers in Syria, which has had until today extremely negative consequences on Syrian society. The misallocation of resources and the proliferation of commercial enterprises and unproductive practices, not centred on employing labour, but lucrative, have dominated the country's economy.

This “new class”, organically linked to the state, needed to invest its wealth in the different sectors of the economy. Decree No. 10 of 1991 was the springboard by which this class was able to “launder” its wealth. This law authorized investment in the private sector and opened up opportunities for import-export, but always under the control of the state, further enriching everyone and pursuing the system of generalized corruption. The transition from state economic centralism towards crony capitalism accelerated in the 1980s, with the progressive abandonment of centrally directed management of the economy.

The 1990s saw the emergence of this “new class” or hybrid class of nouveaux riches/new bourgeoisie resulting from a fusion of the bureaucracy and the survivors of the old bourgeoisie, the “private bourgeoisie”.

The bourgeois features of the system have increased and accelerated with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies since the coming to power of Bashar Al-Assad in 2000. These policies have benefited in particular a small oligarchy and some of its clients. A cousin of President Bashar Al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf, symbolized this Mafia-style process of privatizations carried out by the regime.

The privatization process has created new monopolies in the hands of the family of Bashar Al-Assad, while the quality of goods and services has declined. These neoliberal economic reforms have made possible the appropriation of economic power in favour of the rich and powerful. The process of privatization of public enterprises was done for the benefit of a few people close to the regime. At the same time the financial sector grew, with the establishment of private banks, insurance companies, the Damascus Stock Exchange and bureaux de change.

The neoliberal policies pursued by the regime have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, in particular in the Gulf region, liberalizing the Syrian economy for their benefit and at the expense of the majority of the Syrian population, hit hard by continuing inflation and the increase in the cost of living. The neoliberal policies implemented over the last ten years have caused the collapse of the public sector and led to the dominance of the private sector, which has grown to cover almost 70 per cent of economic activities.

The main supporters of the regime who have benefited from these policies up to now are:

- the leading figures of the security service apparatus;
- networks of bureaucrats and crony capitalists, consolidated around the patronage of various sectors of public services, which have developed and enriched themselves more and more, particularly in the 1990s in the private sector after the implementation of Investment Law No. 10 in 1991;
- the bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus, which has benefited from the neo-liberal policies of recent years, in

particular since the launch of the so-called "social market economy" in 2005.

These sections of society have played a considerable role in the economic policies of the regime, shaping the parameters of reform and development. The consequences of these economic policies on Syrian society are harmful at every level.

Real growth of GDP and real per capita income have decreased since the beginning of the 1990s. The process of economic liberalization has created ever greater inequality in Syria. The poorest are struggling to cope in the new economy because of a lack of employment opportunities, while the "middle class" is in free fall towards the poverty line because its revenues did not follow inflation, which reached 17 per cent in 2008. There is now an unemployment rate of around 20 to 25 per cent, reaching 55 per cent for those under 25 (in a country where 65 per cent of the total population is under 30). The percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line rose from 11 per cent in 2000 to 33 per cent in 2010, while 30 per cent are just above this level. Thus, approximately seven million Syrians live around or below the poverty line.

In agriculture, the privatization of their land suffered by hundreds of thousands of peasants in the North-east because of the drought in 2008 should not be seen as simply a natural disaster. In fact, the increase and intensification of the exploitation of the land by large agricultural contractors (agribusiness), including land previously kept for grazing, as well as the drilling of illegal wells and the installing of selective water pipes to meet the requirements of the new big landowners - all of this facilitated by the corruption of the local government – led to the agricultural crisis. "According to the UN, more than a million people have migrated from regions of the North-east towards urban areas. Farmers have no more income and no more food. Wheat production, considered in Syria as a strategic resource, is estimated this year at 2.4 million tonnes, compared with 4.1 million in 2007. We are going to import wheat for the third consecutive year», national consumption amounting to about four million tonnes a year, wrote the daily *al-Ba'ath* in June, 2010.

The geography of the revolts in Idlib and Deraa as well as in other rural areas, historic bastions of the Baath party, which had not participated on as large a scale as today in the insurgency of the 1980s, including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, show the involvement of the victims of neoliberal policies in this revolution.

## The armed resistance

The Syrian people's movement began in a peaceful fashion, calling for reforms, but the regime responded with violence and all-out repression. Some sections of the Syrian population then organized armed resistance to defend themselves against attacks by the security services and the regime's thugs, known as *shabihas*. They also defended demonstrations and the secure organization of popular committees.

The armed resistance of the Syrian people is the expression of its right to defend itself against repression, and it has made possible the continuation of popular resistance in some regions in the face of the regime's attacks. Revolutionary councils have been formed across Syria, as well as coordinating committees for political and armed actions. Furthermore, a code of good conduct, respecting international law and against religious sectarianism, has been signed by most of the armed groups that are part of the popular armed resistance against the regime. The number of signatories has continued to increase day by day. These measures were taken after acts of torture and killings committed by certain armed groups of the opposition, which were, besides, not necessarily linked to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and which were condemned by the people's movement and the vast majority of the battalions of the Free Syrian Army. An FSA officer furthermore announced his determination to protect the objectives of the revolution and his total opposition to any sectarianism.

The Civil Resistance Unit (CRU), which was established in August in Damascus, is a branch of the FSA dedicated to organizing actions of resistance and to the unification of the popular forces to form a joint military corps. The efforts of the CRU are focused for now on Damascus and its suburbs. The efforts at unification made by the Free Syrian Army are constant, on the ground and throughout Syrian territory. For example, rebel groups from Damascus, Idlib, Hama, Homs and Deir Zor have announced the creation of the "Front for the Liberation of Syria" as the organizational framework, regrouping Ansar al-Islam in Damascus, the Soqour al-Sham brigade in Idlib and Hama, the Al-Farouq battalion in Homs, the Amro Bin A'as brigades and the Deir Zor Revolutionary Council in Deir Zor. Other announcements of armed opposition groups coming together under one banner have also been reported in other regions such as Homs and Aleppo.

Composed of soldiers who have deserted and civilians who have taken up arms, the armed popular resistance has real popular roots within the insurgency. The most important section of the Syrian revolutionary movement is composed of rural and urban proletarians and the economically marginalized "middle classes" who have suffered from the implementation of neo-liberal policies, especially since the coming to power of Bashar Al-Assad. The majority of those who have joined the armed groups of the Free Syrian Army come from these social layers. It is therefore completely misleading and far from any materialist analysis to identify all these armed groups as acting on behalf of and in the interests of regional or global imperialist powers. Moreover, we have seen how different demands of the popular movement, including the unification of the FSA, the appeal against religious sectarianism and the call to preserve the objectives of the revolution, have been taken into account by the popular armed opposition. The campaign for "a revolution of dignity and morality" launched by the local coordinating committees (LCC) and supported by a large number of local grassroots organizations, at the end of August and the beginning of September 2012, focused precisely on these themes and on the principles and objectives of the Syrian revolution which the Syrian people in struggle is committed to respecting, including both civilians and soldiers.

Similarly, to consider the armed popular resistance as a group of Islamic militants acting independently of the popular movement is far from any reality. It is certain that the Sunni Muslim Syrians represent the majority of the armed popular resistance, but to consider each person in this community as an Islamist is false and especially Islamophobic. Indeed, being a Muslim does not mean being an Islamist. The popular armed resistance groups together all the ideological, ethnic and religious components of Syrian society.

Finally, although the presence of foreign troops is a reality, it is over-mediatised and has only a negligible influence on the ground. Most of the analysts of the region and most activists on the ground agree that these forces amount to no more than 1,000, whereas the armed popular resistance consists of about 70,000 to 100,000 men. They are present only in a very limited number of groups. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that these jihadi elements are often not viewed favourably by local populations, and recently clashes took place between groups of the FSA and a jihadist group near the Turkish border.

## The imperialist powers

Similarly, the so-called massive aid sent by the imperialist powers to the popular movement and the armed resistance remains to be demonstrated by real and tangible facts after more than 18 months of struggle. Most Western countries have refused any military aid to the armed revolutionaries, while promising non-military aid. The modest resources of the popular armed resistance come first of all from the army of the regime (weapons taken by soldiers who have defected, weapons bought from corrupt officers, spoils of war).

The big Western imperialist powers, other global imperialist powers such as Russia and China, and regional powers like Iran, as a whole, and without exception, continue to implement in Syria a Yemeni-type solution, in other words, cut off the head of the regime, the dictator Bashar Al-Assad, while maintaining its structure intact - as witnessed

during meetings between American and Russian officials, or at the international conference on 30 June 2012 in Geneva. The only sticking point remains the Russian position of still trying by all means to keep Assad in power, but it could sacrifice him in the near future in order to preserve its interests in Syria. The United States, on its side, has repeatedly expressed its desire to see the military structure and the security services preserved intact.

In reality, the great powers have no advantage in seeing the regime collapse, for the above reasons and for the security of Israel, whose border with Syria has been quiet since 1973.

## Refusal of religious sectarianism

The Syrian people has continued to repeat its refusal of religious divisions, despite all attempts of the regime to light this dangerous fire, which it has used in different forms since the seizure of power by the Assad clan in 1970. The popular movement has reaffirmed its unitary struggle, by developing a sense of national and social solidarity that transcends ethnic and sectarian divisions. Thus, the Kurdish and Assyrian populations have been in their regions the spearheads of opposition to the Assad regime since the beginning of the revolution. Similarly, the Palestinian refugees in Syria have participated in the demonstrations and in the fight against the regime and have given shelter in their camps to many Syrian families fleeing repression. Palestinian refugees have also suffered repression and count in their ranks more than fifty martyrs and hundreds arrested by the security forces. Several Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have been the target of shelling by the army of the regime.

In many demonstrations, we can see signs announcing "sectarianism is the tomb of the revolution or of the homelands" or "no to sectarianism!" Following each massacre by the regime or bombings for which no one claims responsibility, and which many people think are organized by the regime, the popular committees denounce them and call for the unity of the people. The local coordination committees (LCC) in Syria also organized last June a campaign under the slogan "freedom is my sect", in which the LCC carried symbols and placards rejecting the sectarian discourse of the regime and its murderous attempts to turn the Syrian revolution into a sectarian trap. In the town committee of Saraqeb, LCC protesters had placards representing the symbols of all the Syrian religions, while demonstrators in Daeel had a placard saying "In the future, in Syria, the policy of exclusion will be over".

At the beginning of the revolution, the "Syrian revolution 2011" facebook group condemned repeatedly sectarianism and any form of discrimination among Syrians. This facebook group published, on March 24, 2011, a Code of Ethics against sectarianism in Syria. In October 2011, Syrian Christian activists supporting the revolution denounced the proclamation made by the Maronite Patriarch Boutros Ra'ï Bechara in France. He said that the overthrow of the Assad regime would be a threat to Christians in Syria. They reminded Patriarch Ra'ï that Christians have lived for "hundreds of years with their Syrian brothers without fear and nobody, absolutely nobody, deserves any credit for that: Christians are an indivisible part of this country".

These indicators reflect the political and humanist consciousness of a large majority of the popular movement. The Syrian people is aware that the fight against sectarianism means struggle and the overthrow of this criminal regime, and a radical change in society.

This does not mean that sectarianism does not exist in the popular movement in Syria. It exists and we should not deny its existence. In a revolutionary process, different ideologies are present and struggle against one another, and some groups in Syria have recourse to sectarian propaganda in their struggle against the regime.

# The role of the revolutionary Left

So what is the role of the revolutionary Left in these circumstances? Should we leave the battle and wait for a social revolution that is perfect, as some do, and have done in the traditional Left? Or should we decide to be an integral part of this revolutionary process and throw our forces totally into this struggle to overthrow the regime, while working for the radicalization of the various elements of the revolution?

Lenin answered this question some time ago:

“To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without (...) revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. - to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism”, and another, somewhere else, and says, “We are for imperialism”, and that will be a social revolution! (...) Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is” [1].

A revolutionary process is not all of one colour and never will be, otherwise it would not be a revolution. On the other hand, the role of the revolutionary Left is absolutely clear: to fight against the regime and to radicalize the popular movement!

The fight against sectarianism is therefore an essential part of the struggle for democracy, social justice, secularism and for establishing policies in solidarity with peoples struggling for freedom and dignity, and particularly the Palestinian people.

This break with the religious policies and practices of the regime is also in opposition to the Gulf states with their sectarian propaganda and also to sections of the Syrian opposition, - a minority there but nevertheless present – which support this kind of discourse. The Gulf states, it should be recalled, support financially some small armed Islamist groups, but not with the aim of seeing or allowing the victory of the Syrian revolution. Quite the contrary, it is an attempt to divert the Syrian revolution from its initial and always present objectives, that is to say, principally civil democracy, social justice and freedom, into sectarian war. The Gulf states in fact fear a spread of the revolution in the region that would threaten their power and interests. The transformation of the nature of the revolution into sectarian war would also enable them to frighten their own populations in the following way: any change in the region is likely to descend into sectarian wars and therefore we must encourage the status quo, in other words, the maintenance of dictatorial powers.

The reactionary leaderships of these countries want to intervene in Syria to circumscribe the revolutionary process and limit the political, social and economic consequences of revolutions.

Some parts of the opposition parties have also attempted to build a local basis through humanitarian aid or funding of certain armed groups. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular has been condemned several times for such activities, and furthermore an officer of the FSA has denounced the theft of donations by the Islamist organization and its non-support for the Free Syrian Army but for other groups not linked to the FSA. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood has also been accused of using the funds of the CNS, whose distribution in Syria they control thanks to with their tight control of the humanitarian aid commission, to rebuild a popular and armed base inside the country, after three decades of exile.

# Permanent Revolution!

The popular masses, faced with the political calculations and the hypocrisy of the global and regional powers, still want to overthrow the regime, 18 months after the outbreak of the revolutionary process in the country, but especially they continue to organize themselves and to organize peaceful or armed resistance in order to liberate Syria from tyranny. In this struggle, the popular movement repeatedly reaffirms its commitment to freedom, equality and social justice. Political and critical consciousness and practical experiences have continually increased within the movement, strengthening every day the freeing of the people from the authoritarian yoke of the regime and from the influence of its totalitarian ideology.

The formation from below of popular autonomous organizations across the country, as centres of popular power, has also strengthened political consciousness and the experience of the movement of the fighting Syrian people itself in struggle.

The struggle of the Syrian people echoes the words of the Communist Manifesto: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win".

We say in all simplicity but with complete frankness and honesty: those who deny popular revolutions are incapable of envisaging emancipation from below and by the people! Therefore, they cannot be considered to be on the left. The support of the revolutionary Left for the revolution is part of the struggle for the emancipation of the Syrian people, and also of our support for permanent revolution.

Permanent revolution means opposing and overthrowing the dictatorial regime of the Assads, while at the same time opposing global and regional imperialism, which are attempting to hijack the Syrian revolutionary process for their own interests and against those of the Syrian people. For this reason, we reject and condemn all foreign intervention in Syria, whether it is the Western and Saudi/Qatari axis, or the Irano-Russian axis which supports the regime in its repression against the popular movement and in all its military and financial capacities.

The continuation of the revolution is also part of the determination to build a free, democratic, secular and revolutionary Syria that seeks to eliminate all social inequalities and forms of discrimination, ethnic, gender and religious, to support the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people, to respect religious and ethnic minorities, and to ensure democratic and political freedoms for all.

The revolution will be permanent because it also commits itself to make every effort to liberate the occupied Golan, to support the rights of the Palestinian people for the return of refugees and for self-determination on the territory of historic Palestine, and to assist the other peoples of the region in their struggles against their dictators and imperialism.

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[1] Lenin, Collected Works, volume 22, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm>