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**Syria**

# **“There is now a space... to try to rebuild popular civil resistance”I**

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**Syrian-Swiss activist Josphe Daher who has written widely on the situation in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and the region spoke to l'Anticapitaliste.**

**How does the fall of Bashar al-Assad fit in with the Arab Spring?**

The fall of Bashar al-Assad is part of the continuity of the revolutionary processes that began in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, because the despotic Syrian regime has many of the same characteristics as other authoritarian states in the region, i.e. an absence of a democratic framework and a neoliberal political economy that has led to the growing impoverishment of the masses, in a climate of corruption and growing social inequality. Over 90% of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line, and Syria's wealth was concentrated in the presidential palace and businessmen affiliated to Bashar al-Assad and his family.

As a reminder, in Syria, large sections of the population took to the streets with the same demands as those raised by other revolts in 2011: freedom, social justice and equality. The vast majority of the democratic organisations and social forces behind the Syrian popular uprising in March 2011 were bloodily repressed. First and foremost by the Syrian regime, but also by various Islamic fundamentalist armed organisations. The same applies to local alternative political institutions or entities set up by the demonstrators, such as coordination committees and local councils, providing services to the local population. There are nonetheless a few civilian groups, albeit mostly linked to NGO-type organisations, throughout Syria, and particularly in north-western Syria, but their dynamics are different from those at the start of the uprising.

In this context, there are many challenges ahead, but at least hope has returned. After the historic announcement of the fall of the Assad dynasty, which has ruled Syria since 1970, we saw videos of popular demonstrations all over the country, in Damascus, Tartus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Qamichli, Souïeda, etc. of all religious denominations and ethnicities, destroying statues and symbols of the Assad family. The slogans of the early days of the popular uprising were sung again: 'Syria wants freedom' and 'the Syrian people are one and united'. And, of course, there is great joy at the release of political prisoners, in particular from Saidnaya prison, known as the 'human massacre' and which could have held 10,000 to 20,000 prisoners.

**What is your assessment of the nature of the forces at work?**

HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) is now the dominant player in the regions of Idlib and the main cities - Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus and Deir ez-Zor. HTS has embarked on a relatively significant political evolution since its break with al-Qaeda in 2016 and has demonstrated a great capacity for adaptation and pragmatism according to the existing material conditions in order to maintain and extend its power. HTS has also clearly demonstrated in recent years a desire to present itself as a rational force vis-à-vis regional and international powers in order to normalise their dominance. This continues today, with some initial success.

Nevertheless, HTS remains an authoritarian organisation, with an Islamic fundamentalist ideology, and still has foreign fighters in its ranks. In recent years, numerous popular demonstrations have taken place in Idlib to denounce its regime and its violations of political freedoms and human rights, including the assassination and torture of opponents.

HTS is now seeking to consolidate its power over the above-mentioned areas and central government. In particular, it

has appointed a Prime Minister from the National Salvation Government. HTS's civilian administration has been running Idlib for the past few years, with a conservative Islamic government made up entirely of men from or close to its ranks. The new Prime Minister will in any case hold office until 1 March 2025, pending the launch of the constitutional process.

HTS enjoys relative autonomy from Turkey, unlike the SNA (Syrian National Army), which is controlled by Ankara and serves its interests. In recent military campaigns, the SNA is once again primarily serving Turkish objectives by targeting areas controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), which have large Kurdish populations. The SLA, for example, captured the town of Tall Rifaat and the Shahba region in northern Aleppo, as well as the town of Manbij, previously under the governance of the SDF, resulting in the forced displacement of more than 150,000 civilians and numerous human rights violations against the Kurds, including murders and kidnappings.

For their part, the SDF, despite their overtures to HTS, are under ever-increasing threat from Turkey, whose influence has grown in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. Turkey has two main objectives. Firstly, it wants to force Syrian refugees in Turkey to return to Syria. Secondly, to deny Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and, more specifically, to undermine the Kurdish-led administration in north-eastern Syria, the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES), which would set a precedent for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey, a threat to the regime as it is currently constituted.

There are also various armed opposition groups in southern Syria, separate from HTS and the SNA, which played a role in capturing the capital Damascus before the fall of the regime, while HTS's control of the Syrian coastal regions, notably Latakia and Tartus, is not complete.

## What does the future hold for Syria?

Everything will depend on the ability of democratic and progressive groups to organise themselves in the face of both internal threats from authoritarian armed organisations such as HTS and the SNA, and external threats from Turkey, Israel, the Gulf monarchies, Western powers and others. The fact that HTS and SNA forces are stretched is a potential advantage for organising at local level. Only the self-organisation of the popular classes fighting for democratic and progressive demands will create this space and pave the way for real liberation. To achieve this, many obstacles must be overcome, from war fatigue and repression to poverty and social dislocation. To advance these demands, this progressive democratic bloc will have to build and rebuild popular organisations, from trade unions to feminist organisations, community organisations and national structures to bring them together. This will require collaboration between democratic and progressive actors across society. In addition, one of the other key tasks will be to tackle the country's main ethnic divide, that between Arabs and Kurds.

There is now a space, with its contradictions and challenges, for Syrians to try to rebuild popular civil resistance from below and from alternative power structures. And that is already a great hope compared with the past.

*19 December 2024*

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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