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Syria

We need to support forms of liberation struggle unconditionally

- Features -

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This interview was conducted with the Syrian revolutionary Joseph Daher by Italian journalist and activist Mattia Gallo in October 2014.

The mainstream media have described the civil war happened in Syria from 2012 as a clash between religious groups present in the country against the Assad regime, effectively ignoring the dynamics from below. Have there been groups of revolutionaries who fought for social justice, equality, freedom?

For more than three years now, the majority of observers have analyzed the Syrian revolutionary process in geopolitical and sectarian terms, from above, ignoring the popular political and socio-economic dynamics on the ground. The threat of Western intervention has only reinforced this idea of an opposition between two camps: the Western states and the Gulf monarchies on one side, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other. But we refuse to choose between these two camps, we refuse this logic of the “least harmful [evil]” which will only lead to the loss of the Syrian revolution and its objective: democracy, social justice and the rejection of sectarianism.

Lately, mainstream media, whether in the west or in the Middle East, and Western and regional governments, have been wanting us to believe that the Syrian revolution is dead and has transformed itself into a sectarian war between the Sunni majority and the religious and ethnic minorities on the other side, or in a similar trend, in an opposition between jihadists vs. the Assad regime. This last perspective has actually pushed many to join the camp composed of people who range from the conservative right-wing to ill-informed anti-imperialists, who argue that Assad is a lesser evil to the Jihadists. In fact we should oppose both, because they nurture each other and are both seeking to establish an authoritarian system.

A number of examples can show the popular movement still ongoing in Syria pursuing the initial objectives of the revolution democracy, justice social and equality, against the counter revolutionary forces represented firstly by the Assad regime and its allies and secondly by the Jihadist and Islamist forces that have not hesitated to attack revolutionary groups. The Syrian revolutionary masses refuse any kind of oppression, whether from the regime or the Islamist reactionary forces, just as they refuse attempts to divide the Syrian people by using sectarianism or national chauvinism. We have to politically oppose both of these counter-revolutionary forces and continue to struggle for the original objectives of the revolution: “democracy, social justice and equality.”

From the outset of the revolution, the main forms of organization have been the popular committees at village, city and regional levels. The popular committees were the true spearheads of the movement that mobilized people for protest. Then the regions liberated from the regime developed forms of self-gestation based on mass organization. Elected popular councils emerged to manage those liberated regions, proving that it was the regime that provoked anarchy, and not the people.

In some regions liberated from the regime’s armed forces, civil administrations were also set up to make up for the absence of the state in taking charge of its basic duties in various fields, like schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, electricity, communications. Those civil administrations were implemented through elections and (or by) popular consensus and have to provide civil services, security and civil peace among their main tasks.

Free local elections in the “liberated zones” occurred for the first time in 40 years in certain regions, neighbourhoods and villages. This was the case for instance in the city of Deir Ezzor, in late February 2013.

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Those local councils reflected the sense of responsibility and the capacity of citizens to take on initiatives to manage their own affairs relying on their managerial staff, their own experience and clean energy. Such initiatives took various forms, both in regions still under regime control and those that have freed themselves from it.

This does not mean that there are no limits to those popular councils, such as the lack of representation of women, or of certain minorities. One is not trying to embellish reality, but to establish the truth.

Another equally important element in the popular dynamic of the revolution was the proliferation of independent newspapers produced by people's organizations. The number of newspapers went from three before the revolution –all in the hands of the regime – to more than sixty written by these civic groups.

In the city of Deir Ezzor, in June 2013, a campaign was launched by local activists to encourage citizens to take part to the process of monitoring and documentation of the practices of people's local councils. Among other things, the campaign encouraged the promotion of rights and a culture of human rights in society. There was a particular emphasis on the idea of rights and justice for all.

It is also important to remind everyone of the meeting in Rihania, a city on the Syrian-Turkish border, where the Free Syrian Union was formed on October 13, 2013, gathering about 106 military, media, and civil formations under its umbrella. These were all calling for a Free and Democratic Syria in which all sects and ethnicities would be treated equally. Although limited in some regards (e.g. the name Syrian Arab Republic was maintained as well as a call to return to the 'liberal' Constitution of 1950), this initiative must clearly be included in any account of the democratic stakeholders in the revolution.

A prominent example of self-management by the masses took place in the city of Raqqa, the only provincial capital that has been liberated from the regime (since March 2013), but is today occupied by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the first few months following the liberation of the city and despite still enduring regular regime shelling, Raqqa was completely autonomous and it was the local population that managed all the local services for the collectivity.

These popular organizations, often led by young people, came on in leaps and bounds. They multiplied, to the extent that more than 42 social movements were officially registered by the end of May 2013. The people's committees organized various campaigns. The "revolutionary flag represents me" campaign consisted in painting the revolutionary flag in neighbourhoods and streets of the city, to oppose the Islamist attempt to impose the black Islamist flag throughout. On the cultural front, a play mocking the Assad regime was performed in the city centre and at the beginning of June, these organizations held an exhibition for art and local crafts. Centres were established to give the youth an occupation and to treat the psychological disorders resulting from the war. By the end of the year, Syrian baccalaureate exams in June and July were entirely organized by volunteers.

These types of experiences of self-management are found in many liberated regions. It is worth noting that women play a great role in these movements and in the protests in general.

For instance, on June 18, 2013, in the city of Raqqa, a mass protest led by women was held in front of Jabhat al-Nusra's Islamist headquarters, where the protesters called for the liberation of incarcerated prisoners. Protesters shouted slogans against Jabhat al-Nusra that denounced their actions. The protesters did not hesitate to deploy the first slogan ever used in Damascus in February 2011: "the Syrian people refuse to be humiliated."

The women's group "Haquna" (meaning 'our right') also organized many gatherings against the Islamist groups in Raqqa, choring among other messages, "Raqqa is free, down with Jabhat al-Nusra."

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During summer 2013, solidarity gatherings called for the libération of kidnapped activists held in Islamist prisons. The protests enabled the liberation of some activists, but numerous others remain in jail to this day, like the famous Father Paolo, and others including Firas, the son of the intellectual Yassin Hajj Saleh.

In September 2013, following an attack ISIS against the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation in Raqqa, youth groups and activists organized a demonstration to condemn ISIS actions, in which they brandished a big cross in solidarity with the Syrian Christian community of the city. They also issued a statement saying that, “they demand the respect for all religions: Christian and Muslim are one: We have lived and will live as brothers. The people who practiced these actions only represent themselves and the Islamic religion is innocent of such acts.”

In the people’s organised resistance to the Islamist groups in the city of Raqqa, like elsewhere, women have played a leading role. Suad Nofal, a school teacher, for example, has been protesting nearly daily for months against ISIS’s authoritarian practices, demanding the release of political prisoners.

Similar protests contesting the authoritarian and reactionary practices of the Islamists took place in Aleppo, in Mayadin, al-Qusayr and other cities like Kafranbel.

In the neighbourhood of Bustan Qasr, in Aleppo, the local population has protested numerous times to denounce the actions of the Sharia Council of Aleppo, which contains many Islamist groups. On August 23, 2013, for instance, the protesters of Bustan Qasr, while condemning the regime’s use of chemical weapons against the people in Eastern Ghouta, were also calling for the liberation of the famous activist Abu Maryam, once more jailed by the Sharia Council of Aleppo.

They continue to demand his release to this day. At the end of June 2013, in the same neighbourhood, the activists shouted, “go f*c* yourself, Islamic council,” protesting at the repressive and authoritarian politics of the latter. Popular outrage was also expressed following the assassination by foreign jihadists belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group (ISIS) of a 14-year old boy, who allegedly made a blasphemous comment in a joke referring to Prophet Mohammad.

A protest was organized by the popular committee of Bustan Qasr against the Islamic council and the Islamist groups. Activists cried, “what a shame, what a shame, the revolutionaries have become shabiha,” comparing the Islamic council to the Syrian regime’s secret police, a clear allusion to their authoritarian practices.

There are weekly protests on Fridays. During the one on Friday 2 August 2013, the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), who corculate information but also supply foods, good and services to the populations and the refugees, declared this in a release: “in a unified message from the revolution to the entire world, we are confirming that the kidnapping of activists and essential actors of the revolution, unless they serve tyranny, hinder the freedom and the dignity of the revolution.” This message was addressed directly to those reactionary islamist groups. In the same vein, on 28 July 2013, the LCCs wrote a release with the title “the tyranny is one, whether in the name of religion or of secularism,” rejecting both the islamists and the regime.

The Council of Salah Eldeen Quarter, in Aleppo, signed a placard on September 27 2013, saying in opposition to ISIS: “Take Your Islam and Leave Us Our Islam – Islam conquered hearts before lands”.

Coordination committees such as the Kurdish Fraternity Committee have accused ISIS of “occupying cities and terrorizing citizens”, equating them with the pro-regime group Hezbollah, which has been ruthlessly targeting civilians. Members of those committees demonstrated in Ashrafiya, Aleppo, on September 20, 2013 against ISIS with banners saying, “Syria will be free, free; ISIS, get out” and “We Syrians Reject Masked Fighters in Our Country,”

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“ISIS is the Regime’s State of Iraq and Syria”, and “Our Syria is colourful. No to ISIS and its black flag.”

In earlier September, eleven civilian groups representing the organized structures of the revolution in a broad area outside Damascus, rallied strongly around Razan Zaitouneh, a key grassroots revolutionary figure. The 36-year-old lawyer was threatened and harassed by members of armed jihadist factions in eastern Ghouta of Damascus, for no other reason than “being an independent and unveiled woman who is among the grassroots leadership cadres of our revolution,” as one activist put it.

More recent examples can be also be cited, such as the Statement of the Civilian Movement in Syria Regarding the Remarks of Mr. Zahran Alloush, Commander of the Army of Islam on October 14, 2013 in which groups and members of the Syrian revolutionary process stated their rejection of any attempt by any party to impose authoritarianism upon decision-making and upon the work of citizens. We also reject any attempt to make compliance with any institution not elected by the people, no matter how powerful or wealthy the institution, a benchmark for the public good or a gauge of patriotism or an indicator of the ability to perform civic duty today.

This statement was issued after Mr. Zahran Alloush (Commander of the Army of Islam) pronounced the establishment of the expanded Douma Civilian Council “divisive” because it ought to have taken the Consultative Council that is associated with him as its sole reference point.

In the eyes of the people, ISIS is yet another face of the Assad regime because of its authoritarianism, as expressed on a banner in a demonstration on December 27 2013 in Maraat al-Numan in Idlib that said, “The majority of us have become wanted by two states (the Assad regime and ISIS)”.

On January 3, 2014, demonstrations occurred in different locations where ISIS was present to demand its departure and overthrow. Chants such as, “Assad and ISIS are one” or “ISIS get out”, widely used for a while now in liberated areas of Syria, were heard everywhere.

The Syrian revolutionary masses have proven for some time now that their revolution is not dead and never has been. But the world does not want to see this symbol. Pundits ignore the fact that, in a neighbourhood of Aleppo as late as Saturday, January 4, 2014, slogans are still being used against the Assad regime and against the jihadists – slogans such as, “our revolution is against all oppressors ” or “the Syrian people will never submit”.

On March 14 2014, many demonstrations were held across the country to celebrate the third anniversary of the revolution, and various campaigns have been organized in various liberated territories.

Activists in Aleppo distributed flyers in areas under the control of the regime that stated that the revolution continues until victory, until the downfall of the regime. This was part of the campaign “we resist despite the violence of the regime.” The activists of this campaign also stated that peaceful means of resistance continue to be a tool of resistance in this revolution.

A number of events and actions took place in the free territory of Aleppo. An exhibition of pictures and of drawings by children in memory of the martyrs of the revolution was organised, in addition to a theatrical performance about the history of the revolution. Other actions included covering a square with the pictures of the martyrs of the revolution, and a campaign, “the wall tells the story of the revolution,” in which drawings were made on walls in various neighbourhoods.

In the region of Idlib, a campaign has been launched by various groups of activists to commemorate the third year of

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the revolution. The campaign involves a variety of different events, including a demonstration with the songs of the beginning of the revolution, painting walls in cities and villages with slogans of the revolution and the reasons why the revolution started, and a theater performance.

The Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) launched a new campaign called: "Pain and Hope: The Revolution Continues". For the commemoration of the ten years of Kurdish Intifada on March 12 2014, many demonstrations also occurred in various cities, including Amouda, Efrin, and Qamichlo. On March 8, the group Syrian Women's Initiative launched a campaign calling for a democratic and pluralist state in which the rights of women are guaranteed.

During April and May, actions were organized against the jihadists and Islamist groups. In the city of Minbej, near Aleppo, occupied by the IS, a general strike was declared in late May by the people of the city to protest against the occupation of the city by the IS. A group of Syrian activists have also launched a campaign to demand the release of four revolutionaries (including Razan Zeitouneh, Syrian activist, kidnapped with her husband and two legal colleagues), kidnapped in December 2013 most likely by the Islamic Front, which had threatened activists in the past. Demonstrations took place, for example in the town of Douma, near Damascus, and in the neighborhood of Salah el-Din in Aleppo under the slogan "Traitor is he who kidnaps the revolutionaries."

During the sham elections of June 2014, which saw the re-election of Bashar Al Assad, activist groups have distributed flyers and brochures, of course through hiding from the security forces, in cities and areas under the domination of the regime, such as in Damascus, Aleppo and Hama, condemning the crimes of the regime and reiterating their commitment to continue their revolution until victory. Meanwhile protests were held in many "liberated areas" to denounce these "elections of blood." We also saw some revolutionaries in the liberated areas, transforming trash bins into ballot boxes which were decorated with the following inscriptions: "You can vote here," "We'll throw you, Bashar" and "Bashar, that is where you reside." In the city of Qamishli, a demonstration was organized by the Kurdish youth movement condemning the election as a farce orchestrated by Assad and calling for a boycott of the latter.

During the Israeli military aggression against the Gaza Strip, demonstrations of solidarity were held with the Palestinian people in the "liberated territories" of Syria, especially in various districts of Aleppo, in the town of Qaboun near Damascus, Deraa, etc.,

In the neighborhood of Salah el Din, in Aleppo, the protesters sent this message to the Palestinian people: "From Salah el Din to the people of Gaza, we are one, as is our fight against our enemy." A candlelight vigil was also held in Aleppo for Gaza, while groups of children demonstrated massively in the city of Qaboun in solidarity with Palestine. There have also been demonstrations in support of Gaza in the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk. On the Golan, Syrian territory occupied by Israel, protesters supporting the Syrian revolution have condemned Israel's attack on Gaza, with placards that required stopping the killing in Syria and Gaza.

In early August 2014, activists of the popular committees in some neighborhoods of Aleppo have launched a campaign to revive the peaceful protests against the regime of Bashar Al Assad while also opposing the Islamic state and the dangers posed by this latter as it was at the gates of Aleppo. The campaign is entitled: "peaceful activism is the pulse of the revolution."

The campaign brings together the revolutionary councils of the districts of Salah al-Din, Bustan al-Qasr, Kalasa and the ancient city of Aleppo, the Coordinating Committee of the district of Mashhad, and rescue teams of civil defense. The Free Council of the city of Aleppo, the Syrian Women's Association and a number of independent activists have also joined this mobilization.

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On the first day of the campaign, the Revolutionary Council of Salah al-Din held a vigil. Participants carried banners in response to an article published in the American magazine Live Wire, calling Aleppo “the most dangerous city in the world.” The protesters wanted to send a message reminding that their city is alive and deserves their affection despite the dangers of living there. In the east of Aleppo, the demonstrators took part in a march from the Salah al-Din neighborhood through Mashhad and ending in the Ansari neighborhood. The students participating in the event held up signs calling for a return to the values upheld at the beginning of the revolution of 2011, and for the unification of the Free Syrian Army.

We can see that the popular movement is still alive, despite all the dangers threatening it.

A banner raised in the city of Kafranbel in December 2013 summarized the situation very well: “The enemies are many...the revolution is one...and continues.”

Do openly left-wing forces exist in the revolutionary movement?

Different leftist forces have been involved in the Syrian revolutionary process since the revolutionary process began. We can find numerous smaller leftist groups and youth in Syria participating in the revolutionary process, in popular committees on the ground, organisation of demonstrations and of the provision of services to the population. The left has mostly been engaged in the civil work, as opposed to participating in military operations.

There is a long tradition of Syrian leftist forces and currents. We must not neglect them. They range from communists to Marxists of various currents, to nationalists.

At the beginning of the revolutionary process, progressive political forces established a coalition called al-Watan, encompassing 17 leftist parties, which were playing a very important role in the mobilization on the ground far from the media coverage. The organisations belonging to this coalition were targets of the regime and many were repressed. The coalition is not anymore functional, but some organisations are still playing an active role in some regions.

From the very beginning, despite our modest capacities, we, the Current of the Revolutionary Left has remained committed to the revolution, calling for democracy and socialism. We have struggled alongside the people and all democratic forces for the victory of this great popular revolution, just as we struggle for the formation of a socialist workers’ party. We also established a small armed brigade in March 2014.

We can also talk of the National Coordinating Committee for Democratic National Change (NCC) – a group of Arab nationalist, Kurdish and socialist parties. The NCC gathers notably the National Democratic Rally, which is itself comprised of five parties, notably the Democratic Arab Socialist Union headed by Hassan Abdul Azim, the official spokesperson for the National Democratic Rally and chairman of the NCC. The Rally also included the Arab Revolutionary Workers’ Party, represented by Hazem Nahar; the Communist Labor Party, represented by Abdul-Aziz al-Khair, (who was kidnapped in September 2012 by regime forces upon his return from a visit to China; his fate remains not known); the Arab Socialist Movement, represented by Munir al-Bitar; the Syriac Union Party; and the Democratic People’s Party, which has not been represented in the Executive Bureau of the National Coordination Body. The National Coordination Body also included parties with Marxist leanings such as the Together for a Free Democratic Syria movement, founded by Mounzer Khaddam; and independent, civil society neighborhood committees.

As for Kurdish representation, the Coordination Body initially included four political parties represented by two members within the Executive Bureau: Saleh Muslim Mohammed representing the Democratic Union Party and

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Nasreddin Ibrahim representing the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria. However, with the exception of the Democratic Union Party, the other Kurdish parties withdrew from the National Coordination Body in January 2012 to join the Kurdish National Council while the Democratic Union Party is very independent of any decision of the NCC.

Some key members and activists of the NCC have suffered repression from the regime, despite the fact that they have called for negotiations with the regime since the beginning of the protests in March 2011 and they refrained from calling for the overthrow of Assad. This moderate stance has cost them a lot of their popularity and rejection especially from democratic and leftists activists.

It is true that a mass socialist revolutionary party with tens of thousands of members might not exist in Syria, but this is something that is not unique to Syria. Similarly, there is no mass party expressing other political tendencies. The ban on political activity and the violent and perpetual repression for the past 40 years have prevented such developments.

This absence should not be an obstacle in supporting this revolution. It's the same in terms of participation in a revolutionary struggle – especially relocated as part of the regional political situation, which opened in 2011 – whose priorities are: democracy, social justice, and true independence! We do not choose under what conditions a revolution happens, as Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, “Humans make their history themselves, but they do not do it arbitrarily, under conditions chosen by them: they make it under given conditions, directly inherited. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

What was the political and economic situation in Syria before 2011? Were carried out policies of neo – liberal in Syrian society by governments in previous years? What has been the impact of these policies on Syrian society?

The roots of the revolutionary process are the absence of democracy and increasing social injustice as a result of neoliberal policies, especially as implemented to a high degree with the arrival to power of Bashar Al Assad in 2010.

But we should remember that the advent of Hafez Al Assad to power marked a new era in Syria whereby independent popular organizations from trade unions to professional associations and civic associations came under the regime's authority after harsh repression. Professional unions of doctors, lawyers, engineers and pharmacists were dissolved in 1980. They were the main organizations previously leading the struggle for the return of democratic freedoms and the lifting of the emergency rule. They were re-established but their leaders were replaced by state appointees.

In the school system, the regime targeted principally leftist teachers from different tendencies in the 1970s onwards, simultaneously allowing religious fundamentalist currents to develop.

No immunity was granted to university campuses, neither to teachers nor to students. Security agencies could actually arrest students inside lecture halls and/or on campus and they did.

In a similar manner, the regime imposed its domination on the bureaucracy of the trade union workers, and this is what hindered the labour struggle against neo-liberal policies pursued by the authoritarian regime since 2000, which has allowed the decline in the standard of living of the majority of the people, as well as political repression.

The regime's bourgeois credentials were clearly established in 1970, when Hafez al-Assad put an end to some radical policies of the 1960s of the left wing of his Baath Party. They were accelerated with the implementation of

neoliberal economic policies when [his son] Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000. These policies have benefited in particular a small oligarchy which has proliferated since the era of his father, because of its mastery of the networks of economic patronage and their loyal customers. Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, as we will see later, perfectly embodies this mafia-like process of privatization conducted by the regime in favour of its own.

New monopolies have been created in the hands of Bashar's family while the quality of goods and services has decreased, particularly in the health sector and education where private institutions have multiplied. At the same time the financial sector has developed with the growth, from 2004 on, of the first private banks, dominated by Syrian capital and the Gulf oil monarchies, of insurance companies, the Stock Exchange of Damascus and bureaux de change. Bashar's coming to power has however restricted the circle of those who enjoyed the "spoils" of the regime; these were distributed more widely under his father, when several groups could conclude business and win the favour of the state.

The son of a former commander of the Syrian Republican Guard and second cousin of the new dictator, Makhlouf thus controlled, on the eve of the uprising of 2011, nearly 60% of the economy of the country, thanks to a complex network of holdings. His economic empire includes telecommunications, oil and gas, as well as construction, banks, airlines and retail. He is also owner of the only duty free firm, as well as several private schools to which the children of the dignitaries of the regime and of the Syrian bourgeoisie are sent. The personal fortune of Rami Makhlouf is estimated at close to 6 billion dollars. It is to be noted that at the beginning of 2011, the British magazine *World Finance* had extolled Makhlouf's visionary leadership and his outstanding contribution to the Syrian economy, calling him a symbol of the positive change at work in the country. The Chilean case provides a good illustration of the link between neo-liberal policies and political dictatorship in the countries of the periphery.

The neo-liberal policies of the regime have satisfied various social sectors: the upper layers of the new bourgeoisie, which had developed within the state during the previous decades; the old bourgeois elites of the private sector, who had begun to invest again in the country; and foreign investors, in particular in the Gulf region, by opening the Syrian economy to their operations at the expense of the majority of the population, hit hard by continuous inflation. The neo-liberal policies put in place during these last ten years have caused the collapse of the public sector and led to the domination of the private sector, which now accounts for nearly 70 per cent of economic activity.

To better reflect the impact of these economic policies and of their role in the triggering of the popular uprising, it is necessary to look also at the sectors that have benefited from these policies, be it the leaders of the security service and army apparatuses; the networks of the bureaucracy; the crony capitalists sponsored by different sectors of the public services, who have developed and enriched themselves still more within the private sector, particularly in the course of the 1990s, after the implementation of investment laws Number 10 of 1991 ; and the bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus, which has benefited more particularly from the launch of the so-called "social market economy" in 2005 .

The growth of real GDP and real per capita income has decreased since the early 1990s. The process of economic liberalization has created an ever growing inequality within the country. The poorest people have difficulty in coping with this new economy due to a growing shortage of jobs, especially for the young graduates and the inhabitants of the peripheral regions, while the middle class, in particular civil servants and young people finishing their studies, are quickly approaching the threshold of poverty because their incomes have not kept pace with inflation, which reached 17 %, officially, in 2008.

On the eve of the uprising of March 2011, the unemployment rate stood at 14.9%, according to official figures – 20-25% according to other sources; it was respectively 33.7% and 39.3% among those aged 20-24 and 15-19 years. In 2007, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33 %, which represented approximately seven million people, while 30% of them were just above this level. The proportion of poor was higher in rural areas (62%)

than in urban areas (38%). Poverty is more widespread, more rooted and more marked (58.1%) in the northwest and northeast (the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hassakeh), where 45% of the population lives.

In addition, while privatisations have proliferated, the Syrian regime undertook to reform its system of subsidies, penalizing even more the popular classes and the poorest. This is accompanied by the reduction of the quality and quantity of public health services, which has forced the people to turn to the dearer private sector in order to enjoy basic services. The report conducted by the IMF in 2010 welcomed the many measures taken by the Syrian regime: “the unification of the exchange rate and the restrictions on access to foreign exchange for current account transactions appear to have been mostly eliminated. The private banks now lead the growth of the financial sector, and the Damascus stock exchange has recently reopened after a closure of 40 years. Taxes have been simplified and the trade regime has been significantly liberalized”.

The development plan of the Syrian regime from 2006 to 2010 had the stated aim of “continuation of the deregulation of the market, as well as the deepening and the growth of its inclusion in the world market to attract private investment, with extensive structural reforms in order to ensure a good governance of the economy and an equitable growth”.

Syria’s economic growth, which was on average 5% during the years preceding the beginning of the uprising, has not benefited the working classes; in fact, inequalities in terms of wealth have continued to increase. For example, between 1997 and 2004, the Gini coefficient rose from 0.33 to 0.37. In 2003-2004, 20% of the poorest accounted for only 7% of total expenditure, while 20% of the richest were responsible for 45% of the latter. In agriculture, the privatization of land at the expense of several hundreds of thousands of peasants from the north-east, initiated in 2008 ostensibly because of drought, should not be perceived as the consequence of a simple natural disaster. The growth and intensification of the exploitation of the land by big agribusiness companies – including lands previously retained for grazing, and even the illegal drilling of wells, as well as the establishment of lines of selective water meeting the requirements of the new major owners – facilitated the corruption of the local administration which accompanied the agricultural crisis. In 2008, 28% of the farmers were exploiting 75% of the irrigated land, while 49% of them had only 10% of the latter, which is evidence of the progress of inequalities within agriculture. In the same way, the regime has imposed its domination on the trade union bureaucracy, and this has hampered the fight against neo-liberal and authoritarian policies, particularly since 2000. The standard of living of the majority of the population continued to decrease, whereas political repression continued. For example, in May 2006, hundreds of workers protested within the public construction company in Damascus and clashed with security forces. At the same time, taxi drivers went on strike to Aleppo to protest their work and living conditions.

The neo-liberal reforms of the regime have encouraged a policy based on foreign direct investment, which went from \$120 million in 2002 to \$3.5 billion in 2010, particularly in the areas of export, services, and tourism. Before being shattered by the events that began in March 2011, the latter had become a flourishing industry: it represents 12% of current GDP, or approximately 6.5 billion dollars, and employed 11% of the labour force.

The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of large parts of Syrian society, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequality, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which thus needed no more than a spark. As Bashar al-Assad put it at the end of January 2011, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal: “Despite more difficult circumstances than in most Arab countries, Syria is stable. Why? Because you must be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.” The Syrian leader was very wrong, as he would find out two months later.

What is your opinion on the attack of the United States and its allies in Syria against Isil?

The initial declared objective of the USA led coalition was to target Daech (the Arab acronym for ISIL) military facilities and training camps, but more particularly its oil facilities to try to stem a source of revenues for the group.

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Before the military operation initiated by the United States, IS earned about 3 million dollars (2.4 million euros) in revenue per day through oil. But since the strikes began, pumping in the fields under their control virtually ceased. The USA led coalition targeted various Daech positions.

For example, on September 25, the USA led coalition targeted 12 Daech controlled modular oil refineries in eastern Syria.

On September 29, the coalition bombed the city of Tal Abyad, occupied by Daech, in Al-Raqqa province and struck Tabqa airport eight times, a former regime base which Daech fighters captured in August.

The USA led coalition has nevertheless targeted since the beginning of its operation not only Daech, but also Jabhat al Nusra (official al Qaida branch in Syria), the affiliated Khorasan Group in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, as well as civilians and civil infrastructures.

The U.S.-led air campaign has killed at least 233 persons, including 211 jihadists and 22 civilians, according to the Observatory in the first week of the bombing.

On September 29, coalition warplanes reportedly hit the city of Manbij, occupied by Daech, in the northeast of the city of Aleppo and one of the strikes may have mistaken the mills and grain storage areas for an IS base, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The strikes in Manbij appeared to have killed only civilians, the workers in the silos. The destruction of city's grain silos will provoke most probably a humanitarian disaster, according to the pro-opposition Aleppo Media Center.

According to local activists in Hasakah, the international coalition targeted the IS-held Ash-Shaddadi and the towns of Margada and al-Hol as well as the surrounding villages in the countryside of Hasakah on September 28, provoking mass displacement among civilians following the unexpected strikes. The coalition's air strikes also targeted the village of al-Fadgami (near the town of Margada), killing six civilians and injuring others though no IS members were present. [1]

On September 28, coalition warplanes struck the Daech-controlled Conoco gas plant in the city of Deir Zor, which is according to an activist, critically important, as it feeds several electricity power stations in the country that produce electricity for approximately a quarter of Syria [2]. A raid also hit Kuniko gas plant, which feeds a power station in Homs that provides several provinces with electricity and powers oil fields generators.

On September 23 in the village of Kafr Deryan in northern Idlib, missiles (Tomahawk cruise missiles, which are in the US arsenal) from the coalition killed at least two men, two women, and five children. There is unverified information that the two men could have been members of Jabhat al-Nusra.

Once again civilians and civil infrastructure are the targets of a USA led intervention. They have actually bombed important oil installations and refineries, and recently targeted a key gas production facility in Syria's eastern province of Deir al-Zour.

In the same time, the Kurdish town of Kobani / Ain al-Arab near the Syrian-Turkey border, is still under the threat of the jihadist force. In the Beginning of October, Daech was actually within 3 km from the Kurdish town and were bombing it.

This is the closest Daech militants have come to the city since Daech started their offensive 3 weeks ago.

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Despite some very few airstrikes by a US-led international coalition to stop Daech, the militants have made advances and captured 67 villages surrounding the area near Kobani / Ain al-Arab. This has resulted in at least 160,000 people fleeing across the border into Turkey,

Meanwhile, Turkish security forces clashed with displaced Kurds protesting along the border deploying water cannons and tear gas. Turkish authorities have also been intermittently preventing people from returning to Syria, worried about members of its own Kurdish guerrilla group, the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, trying to join the YPG in the fight against Daech.

By attacking Kobane / Ain al-Arab, Daech is attempting to consolidate control over its territory between strongholds in Aleppo's al-Bab city and A-Raqqa city. Daech began fighting joint PYD and FSA forces in the Kurdish-majority area of Kobane / Ain al-Arab in July. It escalated its campaign mid-September by employing tanks, heavy artillery and surface-to-surface missiles, publishing photos of the heavy machinery in action on Daech-affiliated media websites.

These bombing are an attempt by Western imperialist forces and regional regimes led by Saudi Arabia to reimpose their hegemony over the region.

The only political groups that will benefit from these bombings are the two sides of the counter revolutions: the Assad regimes on one side and the reactionary Islamic and Jihadist political forces.

The Assad regime will most probably benefit on the short term from these bombings militarily with the weakening of strong military actors, Assad forces have actually continued its attacks on various areas of the country, but moreover the regime sees a chance to regain "legitimacy" with the West as part of an alliance in the War against Terrorism.

The bombing might probably weaken on the short term military Daech, Jabhat al Nusra and other reactionary forces, but will also most likely to prove counterproductive for the Syrian revolutionaries upholding the objectives of the revolution by increasing the popular support for IS, Jabhat al Nusra and other reactionary forces, driving even more recruits to their ranks. These forces are already painting themselves as the only serious anti-imperialist movement, rather than the reactionary and sectarian outfit they have.

On September 26, more than 200 fighters had actually joined Islamic State in Syria's northern Aleppo province since U.S. President Barack Obama said the United States would strike the jihadist organization. Rami Abdelrahman, who runs the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said that the pace of recruitment in September was higher than average but below the surge in July, after Daech declared a caliphate in the territory it controlled in Syria and Iraq and called on Muslims to join a holy war. Most of the new men came from al Qaeda's Syrian wing, the Nusra Front, and were mostly Syrian. [3].

This of course affected Jabhat al Nusra as well, which has not stopped to radicalize even more its discourse to prevent the departure of its members, especially foreigners, to Daech. Following the bombing of their positions in Idlib, some members have claimed their [will and readiness to fight with Daech](#).

This summer for example, before the strikes, Al Jolani declared that "We took up arms to uphold the word of Allah and its arbitration, and deter aggressors, as stipulated by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah", and in another recording he said "Either Sharia arbitration or fighting for the sake of Allah". It is at this period as well that Jabhat al Nusra withdrew from the legitimate bodies of Damascus and Aleppo, working individually to expand its influence, and also launched campaign in Idlib's countryside to "deter corruptors", mainly targeting pro-revolution activists.

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On September 27, following the strikes targeting them, the leader of Jabhat a-Nusra actually threatened to target the West.

“The battle against our countries will come to you,” said Nusra chief Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. “You won’t be safe in your own countries unless you resist the decision of your leaders” to bomb Syria.” Jolani’s threats come a day after Nusra said that nations participating in the alliance have become legitimate targets for mujahideen “all over the world,” describing international airstrikes as an “ugly crime against Syrians” and a “war against Islam” in a statement released by official spokesman Abu Firas a-Suri.

These bombings have definitely strengthened relatively the support of Jabhat al Nusra and other Islamic political forces on the ground as we can see in several demonstrations such as in Aleppo, [Idlib](#), and [Homs](#), demonstrators chant “We are all Nusra” or “Jabhat al-Nusra came to support us when the world abandoned us”.

This increase in popularity will most probably be temporary, but will definitely strengthen these organizations.

The opposition to the strikes in Syria by the coalition and against Daech, Jabhat al Nusra and other Islamic reactionary organizations in no way should make us forget that increasing and multiple popular protests occurred against these counter revolutionary forces because of their authoritarianism and reactionary practices.

It is interesting to note that the Syrian regime has welcomed the strikes from the USA-led coalition. In a statement from the official news agency SANA, Bashar Al Assad, although without specifically mentioning the bombing, said he supported “all international counterterrorism effort”.

In addition, Ali Haidar, Syrian minister for national reconciliation [said](#) that “As for the raids in Syria, I say that what has happened so far is proceeding in the right direction in terms of informing the Syrian government and by not targeting Syrian military installations and not targeting civilians”.

The pro-regime news network Damascus Now hailed the strikes since the beginning as a historic moment, in which “happiness was etched on the faces of the majority of Syrians, because they found international support towards eradicating a cancer which has been rooted in the diseased Syrian body,” referring to the revolutionaries.

On September 29, Syria’s foreign minister said that his government is satisfied with the U.S.-led bombing campaign against the Islamic State group, adding that the airstrikes should be expanded to include all other militant groups in Syria. In an interview with The Associated Press, Walid al-Moallem said the fight against terrorism has aligned Damascus with Western and Arab opponents in fighting the same enemy. Al-Moallem said the U.S. does not inform Syria of every strike before it happens, “but it’s OK.”

As a reminder, the Assad regime only started to target Daech forces in mid-August 2014. Previously, it had let it spread to various areas while targeting democrats and the FSA battalions mainly. Prior to August, no military conflicts had occurred between Daech and Assad forces.

On the other side, these bombings have resulted in wide range of opposition from groups on the ground and the popular movement, while also mounting strong suspicions of the objectives of the USA-led coalition. The Syrian National Council and of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces have supported and welcomed the USA led coalition bombings.

Colonel Riad al-Asaad, Founder of the FSA opposed USA-planned airstrikes before the beginning of the operations

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and declared that it will eliminate Syrians' revolution as it will strengthen Bashar al-Assad and his key ally, Iran. Al-Asaad called on moderate rebels to mass efforts for more unity to revive the Syrian revolution after saying that this latter was being kidnapped by radical Islamist groups and [West-backed agendas](#).

Harakat Hazm, a FSA battalion composed of few thousands men and that operated mostly in Hama, condemned the US led coalition bombing on September 23. They denounced the strikes as "an attack on national sovereignty" and work to "undermine the Syrian revolution". They added that foreign intervention "will harm the revolution, especially seeing as the international community continues to ignore revolutionary forces' calls for weapons," the group said, adding that "the only side to benefit... is the Assad regime, without any real strategy to bring about its downfall." [see full statement here](#).

Regarding armed groups, Abu Ammar al-Halabi, former leader of the Islamic Front in Aleppo, expressed his condemnation of the coalition's strikes because they do not target the regime, "which used chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta -southern Syria- in 2013, killing 1400 people in one day".

A number of other groups have raised their opposition to USA-led coalition strikes, such as the [Jaish al-Mujadeen](#), Abu Ratib, head of the Al-Haq Brigade, part of the Islamic Front, characterized the intervention "[a total war against Muslims](#)"; Suqour al-Sham, the main Islamic Front unit in Idlib, condemned the airstrikes and said they "[will breed more extremism and terrorism](#)"; the Army of Islam, the IF unit in Damascus, also condemned the strikes; the FSA Forqat 13 issued a statement condemning US-led airstrikes as "aimed at weakening the revolution" in Syria

A number of popular organizations and opposition armed groups have also opposed the international coalition bombings.

The LCC declared that "an end to the Islamic State needs to happen concurrently with an end to the equal terrorist threat represented by Bashar al-Assad's regime," and note that they "are herewith confirming their previous stances considering Assad's regime the foremost enemy of the Syrian people and assuring that extremism and terrorism were the products of the regime's crimes." [See full statement](#)

Several popular committees and organizations operating in Damascus and its countryside issued a statement rejecting the military operations of the international coalition led by USA and supported by some Arab regimes, which bombed several sites in Syria targeting civilians under the pretext of targeting the organization of the Islamic State. They reject the strikes against jihadist groups that stood on the side of the Syrian revolution and the defense of civilians, while accusing these bombings of serving only the interests of the Assad regime, and not the interests of the Syrian people and the revolution. On September 27, a demonstration in Qaboun neighborhood of Damascus was organized to refuse the international military operations against Syria, and rejecting [any kind of foreign intervention](#).

The Local Coordination committee of al-Hara City, in Daraa province, wrote on its facebook to condemn the bombings the following thing: "Screw you (lit. screw your moustache) and screw every Arab leader who participated in the oppression of the Syrian people and declared them fair game...Really, Arabs no longer have any shame."

In the same time, LCC in Salqin, Idlib, wrote on its facebook page that "The international coalition will pursue the destruction of infrastructure—roads, bridges, electricity stations, different economic institutions—and the goal is to destroy the life and resilience of our people."

We can also see in [video footage shot among Syrian refugees in Turkey](#) that people oppose the bombings against targets other than Daech, that no illusions exist in the USA led coalition and these bombings are not in the interests of the Syrian revolution but of the countries of the region and of the Assad regime.

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The Violations Documentation Center has also opposed these strikes arguing that: “The present air strikes against those groups raise concerns that civilians may also pay a heavy price, as such groups establish command centers in civilian areas, in various Syrian towns and villages. Furthermore, a number of the command centers have been converted by those groups to become detention centers. Thousands of inmates and persons who have been kidnapped, including many activists and journalists are now detained in such centers. Those groups also control installations containing dangerous materials, including the Conoco gas plant, in the Khasham village near Dei Ezzor. This plant contains one of the largest ISIS centers. If its gas stocks are hit, this may cause enormous destruction as well as an environmental hazard of incalculable proportions.”

We have also seen banners condemning the bombings or the hypocrisy of the regime such as “the planes coalitions showed the lie of those who support the regime on a so called “Resistant” and “anti imperialist” basis.”

The Revolutionary Left Movement have opposed these bombing since the first day [see statement](#).

The National Coordinating Committee for Democratic Change in Syria also rejects USA intervention in Syria, even with the Syrian government’s approval.

At the same time, some Syrian revolutionaries in the city of Da3el have condemned the fact that UN security Council have adopted a binding resolution to stem the flow of foreign jihadists in Syria and Iraq, and oppose the threat they pose to their country of origin, while not a single word was said of foreign fighters on the said of the Assad regime, particularly of Hezbollah and Iraqis sectarian militias, Pasdaran.

The YPG (People’s Protection Units), arm branch of the PYD, recently sealed an anti-IS alliance with various groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), founding what they call the Joint Action Center. Its purported goal is to liberate all territories held by IS in Syria. The announcement was made in a joint statement in the Kurdish city of Sari Kani in northern Syria.

In the statement both groups call on the international community to assist them militarily so they can eradicate the extremist group.

In conclusion, the objectives of the USA led coalition are not to assist and help the Syrian revolutionaries or to protect them from Daech or the regime. The objective is to reimpose their hegemony over the region and guarantee a form of stability, especially to the reactionary regimes of the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, by putting an end to the revolutionary processes.

These strikes are also in the framework of reaching a Yemeni solution, as it has since the beginning, in other words reaching an agreement between the Assad regime (or a section of it) and the opposition linked to Western and Gulf regimes. The approval of the US Congress of the \$500 million to support President Barack Obama’s plan to arm and equip five to 10,000 Syrian rebels, which Washington describes as “moderate” in their fight against the Islamic State and Syrian regime forces, goes in the same direction as we can see in the text of the resolution:

“The Secretary of Defense is authorized, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for the following purposes:

(1)Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.

(2)Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.

(3)Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.”

The will of the USA to constitute armed groups in Syria loyal to their interests is nevertheless thwarted by the reality on the ground and the will of the opposition armed groups in their vast majority to collaborate only if they are able to maintain their independence and autonomous decision and if the collaboration includes a clear plan for the overthrow of the Assad regime. Colonel Riad al-Asaad, the leader of the Free Syrian Army, for example said it would not join the alliance against the Islamic State unless it receives assurances on toppling the Syrian regime. He added that “If they want to see the Free Syrian Army on their side, they should give assurances on toppling the Assad regime and on a plan including revolutionary principles.” Other armed groups present in the Supreme Military Council of Syria, close to the USA, also expressed their resentment to the USA and other Western forces for their lack of support. In addition, they said that coalition airstrikes against ISIS targets were not enough. The strikes must also hit al-Assad’s forces, they said. One of the commanders said that “we need to deal with this problem at its root cause: Assad, the gangs that support him, and Daech. Those are the three problems every Syrian deals with.” Many armed groups were also critical of the way the strikes were being carried out and as we have seen many inside the country on the side of the revolution reject these bombings.

The Jihadist and Islamic reactionary forces are used by the Western imperialist and regional forces as the entry point for this new military intervention, but also because they have been judged by Western and regional imperialist forces to have gone too far in their process of expansion for Westernby ignoring state borders and creating unwilling instability for these powers. We should remember that Daech that was established in 2006 was of no interest to these powers when they were confined to specific geographic locations in Iraq first and later Syria and was even financially supported by some Gulf private networks in the beginning.

Although Daech and other sister organizations are a factor of instability for the global imperialist system, we should be clear they are in no way actors for the emancipation and liberation of the people of the region; they are very much the opposite.

The revolutionary processes are in a difficult period with the domination of two counter revolutionary forces, represented first by the old regimes supported by Saudi Arabia such as in the case of Sissi’s Egypt, and Islamic reactionary forces, its best representative being the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Qatar. We can nevertheless see once more that the rivalries between the various imperialist and sub-imperialist forces can be overcome when they have shared and common interests, as it the case with the current bombings in Syria and Iraq by the USA led coalition and welcomed or at least tacitly by Russia and Iran.

A third progressive and democratic front gathering the objectives of the revolutions (democracy, social justice and equality) and able to oppose all foreign imperialist and sub-imperialist forces have not been able yet to constitute itself as a credible alternative political force until now for the masses on the regional basis. All efforts should be put forward to build this third democratic and progressive alternative.

We are living a revolutionary crisis on many aspects as described by Gramsci: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. Daech symbolized on many aspects “this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”, while old regimes are far from dead.

In the same time, the bombings from the USA led coalitions have killed more civilians and destroyed much-needed

civilian infrastructure.

These are the reasons why we should oppose these bombings.

In addition, to believe that Daech, Jabhat al Nusra and other similar organizations can be defeated with the same tools that created them is completely insane. These reactionary forces are indeed the consequences of the criminal authoritarian regimes (for example Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq) and foreign international (mainly Western countries led by the USA at its head) and regional (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Iran) interventions. This new military intervention has indeed no objective of overthrowing the Assad regime.

As a banner held by a Syrian protester in Aleppo last week said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, Albert Einstein" and below "Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003, Syria 2014."

Only the popular mass movement is capable of confronting these reactionary forces and the authoritarian regimes.

We must support and express solidarity with all the democratic and progressive forces in Syria and Iraq as well as the Kurdish democratic forces that resist against the two actors of the counter revolution: the Assad regimes on one side and the jihadist and Islamic reactionary forces on the other side.

In this perspective, it is necessary to defend a local dynamic of self-defense rather than increasing stranglehold of imperialism and therefore we should also support the provision of weapons and arms to these democratic forces in the region to combat both counter-revolutionary forces. These are important element that could empower the democratic forces on the ground and give them the tools to defend them.

For the people who don't feel at ease with the fact of demanding arms and weapons with no political conditions attached from the West, I would like to invite them to read Trotsky's "Learn to Think" and cite this passage:

"Let us imagine that in the next European war the Belgian proletariat conquers power sooner than the proletariat of France. Undoubtedly Hitler will try to crush the proletarian Belgium. In order to cover up its own flank, the French bourgeois government might find itself compelled to help the Belgian workers' government with arms. The Belgian Soviets of course reach for these arms with both hands. But actuated by the principle of defeatism, perhaps the French workers ought to block their bourgeoisie from shipping arms to proletarian Belgium? Only direct traitors or out-and-out idiots can reason thus.

The French bourgeoisie could send arms to proletarian Belgium only out of fear of the greatest military danger and only in expectation of later crushing the proletarian revolution with their own weapons. To the French workers, on the contrary, proletarian Belgium is the greatest support in the struggle against their own bourgeoisie. The outcome of the struggle would be decided, in the final analysis, by the relationship of forces, into which correct policies enter as a very important factor. The revolutionary party's first task is to utilize the contradiction between two imperialist countries, France and Germany, in order to save proletarian Belgium.

Ultra-left scholastics think not in concrete terms but in empty abstractions. They have transformed the idea of defeatism into such a vacuum. They can see vividly neither the process of war nor the process of revolution. They seek a hermetically sealed formula, which excludes fresh air. But a formula of this kind can offer no orientation for the proletarian vanguard."

This does not mean of course that we are uncritical of the leadership of the PKK and FSA democratic sections, which

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do not have a socialist leadership, but the Palestinian Liberation Organization or the National Liberation Front in Algeria did not have those either and this did not stop revolutionary support for them. We have to understand that the various International (USA and Russia) and regional imperialist powers (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) have been trying to smash these revolutionary processes and these groups as well because they challenge the global capitalist and imperialist system by their struggle against authoritarian regimes and reactionary groups, which were part of this system.

As a fundamental principle of revolutionaries, we first need to support these forms of liberation and emancipation struggle unconditionally, before we are entitled to criticize the way they are led.

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[1] <http://aranews.net/2014/09/civilian...>

[2] <http://syriadirect.org/rss/1586-syr...>

[3] <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/i...>