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Syria:

Three Years of Revolt in Syria

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The recent death of Canadian photo journalist and New Socialist Editorial Associate Ali Mustafa in a Syrian military bomb blast was a grim reminder of the brutal war that's ongoing in Syria. Joseph Daher wrote a series of six articles in 2012 that analysed the Syrian rebellion. These articles can be found [here](#). In this article Joseph Daher analyses the many forces of reaction within Syria, and celebrates three years of courageous struggle for democracy and social change.

It has now been three years since the Syrian revolution started. Over the past few months, Governments and mainstream media, whether in the West or in the Middle East, have constantly portrayed the Syrian revolution as dead. They claim either that it has become a sectarian war between the Sunni Majority and the religious and ethnic minorities, or that it has led to a renewal of the old opposition between jihadists (Islamic fundamentalist militants) and the Assad regime.

Both claims are far from the truth. The Syrian people reminded the world of this by celebrating the third anniversary of the Syrian revolution on Friday March 14 with the slogan "It's a Popular Revolution, Not a Civil War." Despite mass killings and destruction provoked by the Assad regime on one side and the threats posed by the Islamist reactionary forces to the revolutionary process on the other side, the Syrian revolutionary masses are still struggling for the objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice and an end to sectarianism.

But before analysing the various forces at work in this struggle, let's first observe the current economic, social and humanitarian situation in Syria.

Socio-Economic Disaster

Since the beginning of the uprising, more than 140,000 people have been killed, more than 500,000 injured and half of the population have become internally displaced or refugees outside the country. According to the Syrian American Medical Society, 200,000 people died of chronic diseases due to a lack of access to medical treatments. Diseases such as measles and meningitis are common, and polio, which was eradicated in 1995, now affects up to 80,000 children.

The level of unemployment has reached 50% and half of the population is now living below the poverty line, including 4.4 million in extreme poverty. The Syrian Gross Domestic Product has attained \$34 billion in 2014, far from the \$60 billion recorded in 2010.

Oil production has plummeted from 385,000 barrels per day to 14,000. To cope with its estimated 150,000 barrels per day domestic consumption, Syria must now import Iranian oil, for a value of \$400 million per month.

The contrast between territories under regime's domination and "liberated" ones should also be noted. In most of the areas under the control of the forces of the Syrian regime in Damascus in particular, on the coast and in the governorate of Sweida (or As-Suwayda) in the south of the country, many public services, such as water and electricity, schools and health services continue to operate more or less normally. Commodities such as bread, fruit and vegetables, gasoline and oil, in addition also to some imported foodstuffs such as sugar and rice are always provided to the population.

At the same time, in the areas controlled by the opposition forces, which represent between 30% and 40% of the total territory of the country, the situation is very different. The state services do not work, formal economic activity is almost completely stopped, electricity is only available few hours per day, telephone communications are nearly completely halted, many commodities, especially medical drugs, are not available, most of the children are not in school and often not vaccinated, and poverty and hunger are widespread. According to ESCWA, an organization affiliated with the UN based in Beirut, some 29% of the Syrian population was without access to safe drinking water in late 2013.

In these regions, which are initially among the poorest in the country – especially rural areas of the north around the cities of Aleppo, Raqqa and Idlib – the consumption of elementary products and services is limited. According to recent reports, fruits and vegetables, not to mention meat, are no longer eaten.

Many Faces of Counter-Revolution

The Syrian revolution is still very much alive, but is facing many threats and counter-revolutionary forces are at work against it.

The most important section of the counter-revolution is from the Assad regime and its allies. Assad's regime has been able to regain the lead on the military field, as we can see with the conquest of Yabroud this month. The military superiority of the regime is notably the result of the assistance of its allies. Iran and Russia have delivered huge military, political and economic support to the Assad regime.

For example, in July 2013 Iran opened a credit line of \$ 3.6 billion with the Assad government. In December 2013, Russian oil and gas company Soyuzneftegas signed a \$90 million deal with Syria's oil ministry for oil exploration and production in a 2,190 square kilometer block of Mediterranean waters off the Syrian coast between Tartous and Banias. In January 2014, Russia stepped up supplies of military gear to the Syrian regime, including armored vehicles, drones and guided bombs.

We should not also forget the increased participation on the military field of Hezbollah particularly, and of Iraqi and foreign sectarian Shia groups on the side of the regime. The number of foreign Shia fighters fighting alongside the Assad regime was estimated at 40,000 at the beginning of the year.

Hezbollah's involvement has been increasing continuously, starting with interventions mostly concentrated at the Lebanese Syrian border to "protect," according to Hezbollah, Lebanese-populated villages in western Homs Governorate in early 2012, both in an advisory and training role and as an active military force. Starting in May 2013, Hezbollah acted as the spearhead for an offensive in Qusayr and Homs. Lastly, they were the leading force in the occupation of the city of Yabroud, while the Syrian regime's troops were only assisting Hezbollah.

Iraqi sectarian Shia militias started appearing in Damascus' southern Sayyida Zeinab suburb and eventually elsewhere further north. The regime also welcomed, on a very small basis, Greek Neo-Nazis, who call themselves "Black Lilly," fighting alongside Assad troops. This military superiority and foreign assistance has enabled army's regime to regain number of regions and territory from the armed opposition.

The Assad regime and its allies remain the most important counter-revolutionary force. But the influence of the Islamist and jihadist reactionary forces that opposed the objectives of the revolution and want to build a new dictatorship has also grown, especially in the military field. They are massively funded by private and state sponsors

from the reactionary Gulf countries.

Meanwhile, the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) has lacked economic, political and above all military support, which has led to its weakening and its division. The FSA has also been the target of jihadists and some Islamic extremists groups that have assassinated few officers and attacked some of its brigades.

The reactionary Islamist forces are nevertheless not a unified camp. Differences and even opposition exist, especially since the beginning of the year after popular and military revolts erupted against the jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS, also referred to as Da3ech), mostly constituted of foreign jihadists.

In this counter-revolutionary camp, the most important actors are the Islamic Front, Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaida affiliated) and ISIS. The Islamic Front was formed in November 2013 following a process that began in September, when several of these groups jointly distanced themselves from the National Coalition exile opposition and its exile government. The Islamic Front is one of the most powerful armed opposition actors on the field today.

The Islamic Front has declared that they will not oppose the FSA, but they do condemn the Syrian National Council (a coalition of Syrian opposition groups based in Istanbul, Turkey) and call for an Islamic political system in Syria. The Islamic Front has the financial and political support of reactionary monarchial regimes in the Gulf. Funding from these groups has attracted many opposition fighters, not merely on a religious basis, but rather because they are better equipped and provide better salaries these groups compared to the brigades of the FSA which lack everything. This is why we should not assume that the fighters of the Islamic Front share the same ideology as their leaders.

It should be remembered that most of these Islamist and Salafist (a sect within Sunni Islam) leaders were actually freed by the regime in the first amnesty given by the Assad regime in June 2011, while democrats and other civil activists were targeted, imprisoned, and assassinated by the security forces.

On the other side, we have jihadist groups divided between ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, which is affiliated with Al Qaida. ISIS has progressively been the main group welcoming jihadist foreigners instead of Jabhat al Nusra. Both groups share nevertheless a reactionary and sectarian ideology.

In this respect ISIS was far worse than Jabhat al Nusra in imposing the burqa on all women, forbidding smoking in the streets, imposing the jyzia (Islamic tax) on Christians, etc. They have arrested, kidnapped, tortured and assassinated civil activists, FSA soldiers and Kurdish individuals, while issuing a Fatwa against Kurds, allowing for their killing and calling Kurdistan "Kafiristan", the land of the infidels.

Many demonstrations have occurred against Jabhat al Nusra and especially ISIS because of their authoritarian practices and reactionary understanding of Islam. In the eyes of the people from the liberated areas living under ISIS domination, their authoritarianism and their reactionary ideology represent just another face of the Assad regime.

Popular anger against ISIS has been mounting for months. At the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014, the popular frustrations and anger exploded following new acts of violence from ISIS. A banner displayed at a demonstration on December 27 in Maraat al-Numan in Idlib expressed popular sentiment: "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 "Assad and Da3ech are one" or " Da3ech, get out" were heard everywhere – these chants have been widely used in liberated areas of Syria for awhile now.

Military members of ISIS were arrested in some villages, while other ISIS battalions were kicked out after popular protest and military fights. ISIS had to leave many areas, often after killing the people, including activists, women and children, who were held in their prisons.

The pressure of the popular masses has pushed military battalions to act against ISIS, especially the Islamic Front, which was initially unwilling to take military action against ISIS. Popular protests and military attacks against ISIS by FSA and Islamic Front battalions are still happening as we speak.

The differences between the Islamic Front and jihadist groups as we explained should not lead us to consider the Islamic Front to be a democratic group reaching to achieve the objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice and a secular state that treats everyone equally, regardless of religion, gender, or ethnicity. On the contrary, the Islamic Front is actually seeking an Islamic State and has not hesitated to attack some democratic groups and individuals.

Islamic Front military chief Zahran Alloush has made threats against the Douma civil council, as well as sections of the FSA. They also share with the jihadists a sectarian discourse against Islamic minorities, especially against Shias and Alawites. Groups of the Islamic Front have recently declared responsibility for the kidnapping of 94 Alawite women and children in the summer of 2013 in order to exchange them against 2,000 prisoners.

Recently, a jihadist speaking on behalf of fighters from Jabhat al Nusra and groups of the Islamic Front said that any person or group fighting for democracy and secularism are their enemies and that they will fight them. In this same video they were upholding a sectarian discourse and calling for an Islamic State.

A clear understanding of Islamic Front politics does not mean that they are to be ignored. There can be unity of action with the FSA on the military field against the regime and the jihadists, but there should be no illusion that they achieve any objectives of the revolution.

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 no to sectarianism."

Imperialist Rivalries

Regional and international imperialist actors, despite differences and rivalries, are ready to agree and share a common position regarding the Syrian revolution.

The Geneva II conference has shown once more the will of the US, the West and the Gulf countries on one side, and Russia and Iran on the other side, to reach a Yemeni solution and put an end to the Syrian revolution in order to maintain the structure of the Assad regime, whether or not Assad remains in power.

The various imperialists and regional powers, despite their rivalry, have a common interest in the defeat of the popular revolutions in the region, including in Syria, and in maintaining the status quo. Rivalries and differences between the US and Russia or Iran have led many to describe the latter two countries as anti-imperialist powers. This is completely wrong on many levels.

China and Russia might have different tactical aims or choose to back separate actors than the US. But they are all bourgeois powers that are and will always be enemies of the popular revolution, solely interested in maintaining the status quo.

No regional and international state power can be the friend of the Syrian revolution, but only the people in struggle in the region and elsewhere.

Despite Everything, the Popular Movement is Still Alive

On March 14, 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 the revolution. The campaign includes a variety of different events, including a demonstration with the songs of the beginning 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 initiative,” launched a campaign calling for a democratic and pluralist state in which the rights of women are guaranteed.

The Revolutionary Left Current in Syria, despite its modest capacities, has not once faltered in its engagement with the revolution, calling for democracy and socialism, has announced the establishment of the “People’s Liberation faction” for the third anniversary of the revolution. This faction emphasized that “its mission is to defend oneself and the popular masses and their freedom paid heavily for it and for the right to liberate themselves from all tyranny and exploitation, in the face of all the counter-revolution forces, particularly the authoritarian ruling regime”.

A Path to Freedom

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

Three Years of Revolt in Syria

Despite the difficulties, the multiple dangers and threats, the killings and destruction, the Syrian people continues its path towards freedom and dignity. As a banner put it on March 14: "Three years of hunger and suffering, but three years of pride and dignity." These past three years have opened a new era for the Syrian people.

We need to oppose both these counter-revolutionary forces, and build a third radical movement struggling for democracy and social justice, and against sectarianism. No solution can be achieved if the democratic and social issues are not dealt with together. Social demands cannot be separated from or subordinated to democratic demands. They go in hand in hand.

The Syrian revolution continues, despite all the threats facing it.

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