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Syria

**"The areas of the uprising
were those that had suffered
the most from the liberalization
measures of the 2000s"**

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On the occasion of the presentation of his book *Syrie, le martyre d'une révolution*, published by Syllepse editions, at the bookstore La Brèche on April 19, we interviewed Joseph Daher on some of the main elements of the revolution in Syria.

The dictator Bashar al-Assad, who was in power at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, inherited the state from his father, Hafez al-Assad...

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, he inherited power from his father as part of a so-called republic (or rather, a monarchy). When Hafez al-Assad took power in the 1970s, he represented the right wing of the Baath Party, an Arab nationalist party of a third-worldist tendency, with a commitment to national sovereignty and certain forms of social justice, but which opposed the class struggle and defended nationalist policies against national minorities, particularly against the Kurds. Accelerated neoliberalization took place under Bashar al-Assad. Here we see a concentration of political, economic and military power in a small family group of people directly linked to state power. We see this transition from the "neo-patrimonial" power of Hafez-al-Assad to "patrimonial" power with Bashar al-Assad, who now holds political power. During the ten years preceding the outbreak of the revolutionary process, wealth inequalities increased. These were the material conditions of the outbreak. The images coming from Egypt and Tunisia inspired this new generation of Syrians to go out onto the streets, several million strong, from March 2011.

In addition to an acceleration of neoliberal reforms, we saw an attempt at a political opening, which was quickly stopped. What were the consequences?

Syria is a country on the periphery in relation to the centre of capitalist accumulation. Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development allows us to understand why forms of social organization that can be considered "archaic" or "primary", based on questions of tribe, religion, regionalism — which can also be found in Europe, but not necessarily as developed — are linked to the capitalist but also political development of this region. It is not a question of essentializing but of understanding the instrumentalization made by those who exercise political power, such as the French mandatory power when it occupied Syria. This is how we can understand why these forms exist today.

In the 2000s, Syria experienced privatizations, liberalization measures, the reappearance of the first private banks, free trade agreements with countries in the region, with Turkey, which greatly affected small industries that do not have the capacity to compete with Turkey, or with foreign products. The areas most affected by the uprising were those that had suffered the most from liberalization measures. We are talking about a poverty rate that is calculated to have risen from 10 to 15 per cent in 2000 to more than 30 per cent, bearing in mind that another third of the population lived just above the poverty line. The social structure of the regime was changing under Bashar al-Assad. The social base of the regime was reduced to the liberal upper middle class. The link with the popular classes was loosened, although the popular base was a little larger and made use of its links through religion, tribe and clientelism.

In 2011, almost 60 per cent of Syrians were under the age of 28. They were a young people, therefore revolutionary...

The images of Tunisia and Egypt all day long on television gave rise to a desire for change. Already between January and March there were small demonstrations in some cities, in some neighbourhoods, before the actual outbreak in mid-March 2011. These new generations did not directly experience the repression of the 1980s. In 2011,

until the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, the popular movement was deeply-rooted. Moreover, along with Libya, we were in a real "revolutionary situation". There were swathes of Syrian territory that were escaping from the control of the Syrian regime, and when the regime had to withdraw from parts of Syria, people began to organize on all aspects of society. This is where the local councils were born. The idea was to go beyond simple coordinating committees, which were usually neighbourhood or village organisations, to the regional level, and to try and organise demonstrations. The idea came from a militant of the revolution, Omar Aziz, a doctor and an anarchist, of founding a counter-power that would organize everything from A to Z. Local councils were emerging, out of necessity, since the "state" had disappeared. The dominant message was democratic, a message of social justice, equality, even though there was also a lack of organization linked to decades of repression, a lack of will of a majority of the democratic and liberal oppositions to form free trade unions, mass feminist organizations, etc., while reducing the fight to its democratic aspects.

From the failure of the Free Syrian Army, two antagonistic political camps emerged: the jihadists and the democratic confederalism of the PYD. However, in 2012, jihadism was in a hyper minority. How did the jihadists manage to gain a foothold?

There was a turning point, that was, moreover, regional, in the summer of 2013, with the coup d'état in Egypt against the president of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was rather a coup against the revolution itself, and which went beyond the Muslim Brotherhood. It was not a problem to receive Sisi in several European capitals, including Paris. In Syria, the turning point was the use of chemical weapons at the Gouta in the suburbs of Damascus, which caused several hundred deaths. While US President Obama had announced that chemical weapons were a red line not to be crossed, there was no reaction. From then on, the opposition, whether armed or political, weakened, and the fundamentalist and Islamic organizations, which already had a criticism of Western states, and therefore Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra, etc. were growing stronger. They began to dominate the armed arena. We were also increasingly seeing the split between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, and their monetary effectiveness on the terrain, the ability to rake in money, to accumulate capital through different private sources, from the Gulf monarchies or through smuggling and theft.

The Syrian National Council (SNC) and the FSA made mistakes that the Kurdish PYD did not make. From July 2012, a second revolution within the revolution was born in northern Syria, but with a progressive political leadership...

The parent organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), had decades of political experience from the 1970s and 1980s. It had a presence in Syria and even an alliance with the Syrian regime that turned against it with the rapprochement with Turkey. From the 2000s, political developments within the PKK led to the founding of sister parties in national structures, hence the PYD. With the outbreak of the revolutionary process, the majority of Kurdish parties did not necessarily participate in the demonstrations. The PYD emerged from this, with a very important political experience from the PKK, and it benefited from the fact that the weakened regime left the task of administration to the PYD, and armed groups returned from the mountains of northern Iraq. Rojava and the autonomous authority of north-eastern Syria developed, whose aspirations were very interesting: the question of women, a desire for Arab unity, the encouragement of secular laws, civil marriage and the idea of a Syria conceived in a different way, far from a centralizing, authoritarian state.

*Interview conducted by Camille Nashorn. Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).*

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