

Interview

Syria's Bloody Civil War - "It's a very decentralised type of uprising with all sorts of groups waging a common fight against the regime"

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Interview with Gilbert Achcar, academic, writer, and activist, Professor at the Development Studies Department at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London (SOAS).

Amandla!: What would you say to those who argue that the Syrian uprising may be an opening for imperialist interests in the region?

GA: We have to distinguish between two aspects of the question. One aspect hints at the kind of conspiracy theory among those that call themselves anti-imperialist and tend to see the hand of imperialism behind everything. But believing that the United States is behind this massive uprising in the region is senseless. The fact is that the US has been confronted with a major dilemma: recent events came at a point when US influence in the region was at its lowest since the first war on Iraq in 1991, and at a time when it the US was preparing for its final withdrawal from Iraq without having accomplished any of the invasion's goals. On top of that, uprisings overthrew faithful allies of Washington, including Egypt's Mubarak, a key strategic partner in the region. To think Washington would have wished for this is ridiculous.

Actually, these events were so overwhelming that Washington rapidly understood it couldn't oppose the tide; it had to pretend to welcome it in the name of the 'democratic values' to which it supposedly adheres. It had no choice but to renew the old alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood that existed until the 1990s, on which it now bets today, in the same way that it relies on the Emir of Qatar to play the go-between.

In Syria, we see Washington's great quandary. As in Libya, it refuses to deliver weapons to the insurgency despite insistent requests (although it intervened directly in Libya, by bombing). The result is a total disproportion in weaponry and training between the regime's forces and the insurgency, even though the insurgency encompasses a much larger section of the population. The truth is that the war has dragged on much longer than it might have had the insurgency received weapons. And the cost is terrible and tragic because of the loss of thousands and thousands of lives. The war is devastating Syria to the point that the insurgents are convinced - for good reason - that Washington and the western powers are happy with the conflict because ultimately it will create a weak, post-Assad Syria, which the US and Israel believe to be in their interests.

A!: What are the specific formations that are acting in Syria right now? Is there a class basis to the uprising?

GA: It's not a class uprising in the sense that it has any form of clear-cut class consciousness. But the uprising started with a peripheral movement in poor rural towns, and the poorest, most downtrodden sections of the population were the insurgency's initial force. The bourgeoisie as a whole is very afraid of the whole movement and the chaos that it creates. So there is no doubt that the uprising is a popular movement.

But because of the historical failure of the left in the region, we have a massive uprising without any capable left-wing leadership. It's a very decentralised type of uprising with all sorts of groups waging a common fight against the regime.

A!: Who are the different groups?

GA: Even when they act under a single name, like the Syrian Free Army, they are actually local groups with little centralisation. You also have Islamic fundamentalist groups intervening, including one that Washington has recently put on its terrorist list. So here is an uprising, a section of which is seen by Washington as al-Qaeda, and yet you have people saying this is a US plot; this is just ridiculous.

A!: What about the reported conflict between popular democratic and fundamentalist forces?

GA: Well, there are tensions, but no direct clashes because everyone understands that that's not in their interests. They would rather wait to fight against the common enemy, which is the dictatorial regime. It's clear that when the bulk of Syrian territory is liberated, you will have nothing better than what you now have: there will be various armed groups, and it will be quite difficult to build a new unified armed force for the post-Assad state. As in Libya, there may well be clashes between these armed groups. This is, I would say, a natural and inevitable outcome of uprisings in countries that have been under dictatorial regimes for decades, with armed forces functioning as praetorian guards so that there is no way of toppling the regime without a civil war and without destroying the military machine of the regime.

A!: How do you see the role of Washington in the evolving situation?

GA: Recently Washington has intervened through Qatar to impose a new kind of body, the Syrian National Coalition, to supersede the National Council. The crucial point is that Washington wants a deal with the regime that would preserve the state, because it is afraid of chaos, especially in such a strategic location. But this strategy is doomed to fail in Syria. The degree of violence, the numbers of people killed, and the hatred that has accumulated, as well as the completely sectarian structure of the Syrian state, all make it illusory to believe that this kind of compromise is possible in Syria.

A!: To what extent has the monarchy in Saudi Arabia used the uprising to tip the balance towards fundamentalism?

GA: The Saudi kingdom has propagated Islamic fundamentalism in the region for a long time. Wahabi fundamentalist circles in the kingdom send money to people who think like them. So of course this is a problem. But in a region where Islamic fundamentalists have been the dominant force in the expression of mass discontent for three decades, it's impossible to believe there can be an uprising without these currents playing a role. It's everywhere - in Egypt, in Tunisia . . . But very rapidly these forces are losing ground because the dynamics of the uprising, and the depth of the

socio-economic problems, are such that the fundamentalists have no solutions and therefore their failure is inevitable.

A!: What are the socio-economic and political aims of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Syria and in the Middle East more broadly?

GA: The Muslim Brotherhood is actually a bourgeois reactionary force in the social field. They have opposed the regimes because they curtailed their freedom of action, so they were in a common front against the common enemy. But they don't share the same values and goals as other factions of the uprising, especially the young people, the workers' movement, or the women's movement. Their agenda is a reactionary one. Their economic programme is neo-liberal. After years of pretending to have a radical anti-Zionist or anti-Israel and anti-US policy, they have suddenly, since coming to power, become friends of Washington, even continuing Mubarak's policies toward Israel.

A!: What are the implications of what is happening in Syria for Israel and Palestine?

GA: Overall for the Palestinian people the whole Arab uprising is ultimately a major boost. It shows how much the Palestinian issue, as one of the burning issues in the region, is a destabilising factor. Also I would say that the Syrian regime has not been a friend of the Palestinians; it intervened several times to crush the Palestinian forces during the Lebanese civil war, kept Palestinian refugees in Syria under heavy control, and recently bombed Palestinian camps in Damascus. There is a further dimension in that Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The question is whether the Palestinians will have their own assertion of the people's will both against the so-called authority of Mahmoud Abbas and against Hamas.

A!: What do you see as the main accomplishments of the past two years in the region?

GA: The main accomplishment is that the popular movement is boiling everywhere. This is something completely new in the region, which for decades has been under very despotic regimes, where any expression of mass protest was harshly repressed. And now there is a major explosion of popular struggles, which is not being stopped even by the elections. Many thought that after the elections in Egypt, it would be back to business as usual. But there are daily demonstrations and social struggles that are not reported by the media. So this is just the beginning of a long-term process which may take years to get to any new kind of stabilisation in the region. The left in Tunisia was very scattered and divided at the last elections, but they can now draw their own lessons. The trade unions are gaining more and more leverage, and people have been responding with mass outpours to the political assassination of Belaid.

P.S.

* <http://www.amandla.org.za/amandla-magazine/current-issue/1706-amandla>