

INTERVIEW

2011-2016 - How did Syria become a burning country?

Tuesday 13 December 2016, by [SMITH Ashley](#), [YASSIN-KASSAB Robin](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2016).

In 2011, the Syrian people joined their sisters and brothers throughout the Middle East in a popular revolution for liberation from dictatorship. They aimed to establish democracy and equality. The regime of Bashar al-Assad responded by bombing its own people and dividing them along ethnic and sectarian lines.

But Assad's rule-or-ruin tactics could not stop the revolt. It took air strikes and an invasion by Russia, Iran and their allies to shore up the regime in the run-up to current cessation of hostilities and so-called peace talks in Geneva. Robin Yassin-Kassab, the co-author with Leila Al-Shami of *Burning Country: Syria in Revolution and War*, talked with Ashley Smith about the results and prospects of the Syrian struggle. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami will be appearing across North America in April on a tour to promote their book.

DURING THE recent cease-fire, Syrian revolutionaries returned to the streets in popular protests. What is the significance of this?

FIRST, I would like to quibble a little bit with the terminology "ceasefire." What they've officially called it is a "cessation of hostilities," which excludes the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra. So Russia and Assad's state have actually continued bombing ISIS-controlled territory. And they have used that as a cover to bomb opposition-held territory. For example, they have repeatedly attacked Duma, outside of Damascus, where there's no presence of either al-Nusra or ISIS.

So it is at best only a partial cessation, in which the average daily death toll has gone down from about 120 a day, as it was a few weeks ago, to about 40 a day now. That's still awful, but it's a great improvement.

Syrian revolutionaries have taken advantage of this situation to return to the streets in protest on each Friday since the cessation of hostilities. They are waving the revolutionary flag, not the black flags of various Islamist organizations, and repeating the same chants that we heard in 2011. They are chanting, "The Syrian people are one," and again demanding freedom and democracy.

So the original urge for liberation that we saw in 2011 is still alive, despite the fact that almost half a million people have been killed, that half the country is now homeless, and that every city in the country except one has been bombed. This is quite inspiring and amazing.

Amid these protests, we have seen fault lines opening wider between these revolutionaries and Syria's al-Qaeda outfit Jabhat al-Nusra. Revolutionaries have come into conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra, which has tried to interfere with their demonstrations. It's tried to ban people waving the revolutionary flag. It's arrested people and even opened fire at demonstrations.

But the protesters are not scared of them, in the same way that they've refused to be scared of

Assad's barrel bombs, sarin gas attacks and campaigns of rape and torture. They are refusing to bow before the terrorism of these foreign jihadist groups. This continuing display of revolutionary determination shows us that if the Syrian people were allowed to be at the center stage of their own drama, then we would be seeing some positive results. But unfortunately, we've got big states involved, and there's the problem.

WHAT'S YOUR assessment of the talks that are going on in Geneva?

THE REAL answer is I just don't know at the moment. If you'd asked me two weeks ago or a month ago about the political process, I would have said it's entirely theater. But now, it looks like there's a bigger possibility of talks producing something—but not for good reasons or very likely any good results.

We got to this point because of Vladimir Putin's imperialism. Russia has carpet-bombed opposition-held territory—territory held by Free Syrian Army militias and democratically elected councils. Less than 20 percent of its bombs fell on ISIS, and when they did fall on ISIS-controlled areas, they very rarely fell on ISIS soldiers or their weapons. They usually fell on civilians, which probably just helps ISIS.

Russia is in the driver's seat of this so-called peace process, and that's very worrying, because we know that Russia's Plan A was to win the whole country back for Assad. It wanted to destroy the democratic opposition so that there really was only a choice between Assad and the jihadists. Russia calculated that the other powers, including the U.S., would prefer to work with Assad, even if the United Nations has just found him guilty of the crime of extermination, to defeat ISIS.

Now it seems that Russia is going to Plan B. I think it understands that while it can clear land for Assad by bombing, the regime can't hold it. Assad has run out of fighting men. That's why there are tens of thousands of Iranian troops and tens of thousands of transnational Shia jihadists recruited by Iran on his front line. So unless the Russians want to do a big ground invasion and get themselves into another Afghanistan situation, they have to go for Plan B.

It looks like Plan B is some kind of partition of the country, which will not solve the crisis in Syria, but make it far worse. It would trigger sectarian and ethnic cleansing on a horrific scale. People talk about Syria (and Iraq) as if they're religiously and ethnically compartmentalized. In reality, it's not true that you have Alawis, Sunnis, Christians, and Kurds all in different places or on different political sides.

These groups are actually mixed in with each other. Plus, of course, people intermarry. And beyond that, they don't have homogeneous political viewpoints. There are Alawi revolutionaries, and there are still one or two Sunnis who support the regime.

Almost every Syrian, with the exception of some Kurds, agree that they don't want a further partition of their country, and certainly not one done again under the aegis of imperial powers. If those powers in Geneva do impose partition, the new statelets will be in a state of permanent war, especially if Bashar al-Assad is still on his throne in Damascus.

WHAT IS the significance of Syria's Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD, by its initials in Kurdish), declaring an autonomous area?

I THINK it's a disaster. I say that not because I'm against Kurdish autonomy or self-determination. I believe in autonomy for all communities if that's what they want, and I believe in self-determination for all people, for communities and individuals, as much as we can achieve. I think that the Kurds

have a perfect right to self-determination in the three areas in which they are a majority.

The problem is that the three Kurdish areas in Syria are not territorially contiguous. That's one reason why Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK, by its initials in Kurdish) developed the idea of democratic confederalism for its offshoot in Syria, the PYD.

The idea of democratic confederalism seems to be a good idea. It suggests that you could have autonomous borderless areas, which may then later federate, which would allow the Kurds to have their cultural rights, their national rights, and yet not necessarily to create a new state.

What's happened recently is that the PYD has recognized that the balance of forces has changed against the revolution. They've entered into military alliance with both the U.S. and Russia. I'm not complaining about that, because I'm not one of these people who argues that if the Free Syrian Army receives some ready meals from the American government, that means that they've suddenly become CIA agents. I think desperate people on the ground have the right to seek and receive aid, weapons and money from wherever they can get it.

The problem is that in the last weeks, under Russian air cover, the PYD has been moving into areas that have always had an Arab majority. The PYD has claimed it is fighting jihadists, but in places they seized like northern Aleppo, jihadists are not present. It's actually defended by Free Syrian Army brigades and is governed democratically by local councils.

So it looks like the PYD is abandoning democratic confederalism and is now saying, let's link up the cantons into a territorially contiguous area around which we can draw a border and call it a state. This is an undemocratic imposition of a Kurdish region on Arab majority areas.

THIS SEEMS at odds with what the PYD has done in Rojava?

YES, THIS is a tragic development. It's in stark contrast to some of the positive developments in majority Kurdish areas. There, councils seem to provide democratic governance. This aspect of the PYD program is very positive indeed.

It's unfortunate that the PYD itself is adding a layer of one-party state rule on top of this local democracy. While the PYD is probably better than most political parties operating in the region, it's still an authoritarian political party which represses other Kurdish groups and has opened fire on people protesting against it and against Assad.

Part of the reason why the PYD continues to operate this way is that the Kurdish areas did not liberate themselves as part of the revolutionary process in Syria. Assad chose to withdraw in 2012 from Rojava, and in many cases actually handed over the security installations to the PYD. He wanted to engage in a classic game of people against each other and attempted to establish a modus vivendi between the regime and the PYD.

That doesn't mean they're allies. But the fact that the PYD would play this game with the regime and the imperial powers shows that it's not really a revolutionary force.

Having said that, the Kurdish people have done some great and amazing revolutionary things. What we need is solidarity between the Kurdish councils and the councils in Arab majority areas. We need these councils to recognize each other more, to work more with each other. On the political level, I fear that the PYD is making some short-term mistakes, which won't help its state project and certainly won't help the Syrian revolution.

LET'S STEP back from the immediate situation to discuss the Syrian revolution. How and

why did it begin?

EVERY REGIME or government or state system in the world has to govern through a combination of two things—coercion and consensus. Depending on the state, there's a different balance between the two. The current Syrian regime came to power when Bashar al-Assad's father seized power in 1970. He used the Baath Party to impose a totalitarian state with him at the apex.

It leaned heavily on coercion to keep the people down ever since. But it also did things to win consent from key groups in society. So, for example, Hafez al-Assad opened up opportunities for sections of the Alawis, Christians, Ismailis, as well as Sunni peasants. He encouraged them to enter the army, security services and universities.

Many were willing to tolerate the dictatorship as long as their lives improved. The peasantry in general, whatever their religious background, acquiesced to his rule. Their villages were being electrified, roads were being built so they could get crops to market, and schools were being built in their villages and towns. The urban Sunni working class also benefitted through getting jobs in the growing state-owned sector of the economy and from subsidized food and fuel.

Nevertheless, people were discontented with Hafez al-Assad's dictatorship. When Bashar al-Assad came to power in the year 2000, he promised a "Damascus Spring," raising hopes among Syria's masses for a new democratic opening. But those were quickly dashed. Assad the younger actually strengthened his family dictatorship and imposed neoliberal economic changes that were disastrous for workers and peasants.

Assad's neoliberalism was simply crony capitalism. He sold off state-owned companies mainly to his family and friends. For example, the president's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, ended up with a finger in 60 percent of the economy. At the same time, he cut subsidies on food and fuel, destroying the safety net for the poor.

While conditions were terrible before neoliberalization, they grew profoundly worse after it. Discontent began to build and people began to share their concerns over the Internet. Syria was ripe for a resistance movement.

WHAT ROLE did the Arab uprisings play in triggering the Syrian Revolution?

THE ARAB Spring in 2011 showed Syria's masses change was possible. The revolts started in Tunisia and Egypt and then spread through the Middle East and North Africa. The masses of the region rose up demanding democracy and equality. The bravery of these revolts inspired Syrians to take to the streets in protest.

At first, Syrian demonstrators didn't call for the fall of the regime. They certainly weren't calling for the execution of the president, as they would be soon. A lot of people thought Bashar was a reformer, who was surrounded by a bad regime. Some even thought the protests would help him defeat the old guard. Many at the start of a revolutionary process have such illusions.

Of course Assad quickly shattered these naïve hopes. He ordered his troops to repress the protests. They shot demonstrators, killing hundreds each Friday—the day of protests. The regime arrested, detained and tortured protesters, sometimes even primary school age children.

The regime proved to Syrians that it was incapable of reform. Its repression turned the movement for reform into one for revolution. Soon hundreds of thousands of Syrians were chanting for the downfall of Assad.

WHAT DO you think of the claim that the Syrian revolution is a tool of American imperialism to get rid of Assad?

IT'S FRANKLY insulting to chalk this mass revolt up to some American conspiracy. When a tyrant starts organizing death squads that repress, murder, rape and torture protesters, including children, people anywhere in the world would revolt.

It's insulting to Syrians to assume that they're happy with having their children tortured to death until some clever white man comes and whispers in their ear. And, of course, if the Americans had truly wanted to get rid of Bashar al-Assad, they would have done so a long time ago.

Such conspiracy theorists don't concern themselves with the facts. They don't feel they have to talk to Syrians and ask them, "Why are you doing this? What are your motivations? What are your fears? What do you want?" They arrogantly believe they already know.

They already have a pre-packaged story from a decade ago about American imperialism invading and occupying Iraq. That was a criminal venture that made sectarianism in the region much worse, setting in place the conditions that gave rise to ISIS. But it's absurd to impose that story on Syria and say the revolution is an American tool to get rid of a regime that they don't like.

It's also ridiculous to argue that the U.S. is attacking Syria because it's allied to Iran. Remember, Obama's crowning achievement in the Middle East has been the deal with the Iranians over their nuclear program. In reality, Obama is not focused on toppling Assad at all.

He thinks ISIS is an immediate danger to the whole world, so he's bombing them in both Syria and Iraq. He's actually ignoring the Shia jihadists who are on Assad's front lines, who also cut people's heads off and mutilate bodies and slaughter their opponents' children, and so on and so forth. Frankly, the imperial and regional powers are inching toward a grand coalition against ISIS that could include Assad.

These silly conspiracy theories, which see the U.S. behind the uprising in Syria, are an insult to the Syrian revolutionaries on the ground fighting for their lives and the liberation of their country. It's orientalist nonsense. It's a form of racism that denies the agency of the Syrian masses, dismissing them as puppets of an empire.

Certainly Western governments have done a great deal wrong in the Middle East and continue to do so, but their main crime in Syria has not been trying to get rid of the regime. Their main crime in Syria has been appeasing the regime and its imperialist sponsors like Russia and Iran.

Their other crime has been stopping people who wanted to deliver weapons like anti-aircraft weapons, which revolutionary civilian communities in Syria need to defend themselves from this fascist and imperialist onslaught. The Americans have vetoed those weapons going in. Not one anti-aircraft weapon has gone into Syria to the opposition because of the American veto.

Progressives must stop playing this silly game of geopolitical chess—supporting this "goody" state against this "baddy" state. Instead, we should be doing an analysis of who is the oppressed class here and who is the oppressor. And we should be asking, where can we stand in solidarity with people who are struggling?

If the American state decides to invade and occupy another state for its own selfish reasons, then let's oppose that, absolutely. But that's not what's happening here. Here it's actually a Russian and Iranian occupation and invasion of Syria.

That doesn't mean that America is innocent. It is one of chief villains supporting the counterrevolutionary regimes in Egypt and Bahrain and backing the Saudi bombing of Yemen. In Syria, Russian and Iranian imperialism are backing counterrevolution. All imperialisms are nasty and we should not take sides with any one of them.

ONE OF the most inspiring developments in the Syrian revolution is the emergence of popular democracy to replace the regime. How did this develop?

AT THE early stages of the uprising, revolutionaries organized local coordination committees. They were secret underground networks of revolutionaries that coordinated and organized protests. As the repression increased, they also started documenting the regime's crimes.

On top of these committees, revolutionaries organized local councils. A revolutionary anarchist, Omar Aziz, played an influential role in organizing these councils. Tragically, he was later murdered in prison by the Assad regime. He argued it wasn't enough to protest the regime; Syrians had to build their own new democratic structures to replace it. He helped to found three councils in Zabadani, Barzeh and Duma.

After his death, hundreds of councils developed. People in these local communities got together and elected their own representatives. They replaced the government and took over provision of services. There are now between 400 and 700 local and provincial councils in the liberated areas of Syria not controlled either by Assad or ISIS.

It is these councils that have kept life going. Without them, there would be no education for kids, no health care, no food distribution, no bakeries working, and no garbage collection. This is a stunning development of local democracy that should, alongside similar experiments in Kurdish Rojava, be celebrated by the left.

But most people outside Syria have not heard about this flowering of democratic self-organization. This exposes not only a huge failure in the mainstream media, but also in the Western left. That's one of the reasons that Leila and I wrote our book—to educate people about the heroic and democratic achievements of the revolution.

The councils are truly incredible. Despite being under attack by their own state, savage imperialisms, and foreign Sunni and Shia jihadists, the Syrian people organized elected councils. They haven't asked for America to come with tanks and planes to give them democracy. They've done it themselves, which is the only way it can be done.

WHAT IMPACT has the militarization of the struggle had on the revolution?

FIRST, IT'S important to underscore that the revolution began as a mass nonviolent protest movement. The regime turned it into a violent conflict. But Syrian revolutionaries didn't all sit down one day and decide to take up arms. It was the product of a million different individual decisions taken under fire.

Was it inevitable? Was it a mistake? Yes, it was an inevitable mistake. Why was it a mistake? Because when it became militarized, the rebellion lost its mass democratic character. The militias began to substitute for the mass, horizontally organized movement of people from all religious, ideological and political backgrounds.

But in the face of the regime's counterrevolutionary violence, it was inevitable that people would be forced to pick up guns to defend themselves, their neighborhoods and families. It's important to understand how barbaric the regime has become to understand the logic of armed self-defense.

The government organized a rape campaign. When the army went into a rebellious town, the first thing they'd do is go into the houses and rape the wives in front of the husbands, kids in front of their parents and parents in front of the kids. Faced with this, it is completely understandable why people would take up arms in self-defense. Wouldn't you?

So popular self-defense was one development. The other was rank-and-file soldiers defecting from the regime to join the revolution. Remember, Assad ordered his troops to shoot their fellow men, women and children. Obviously, many of those soldiers were going to refuse such orders and run away at the first opportunity they got.

The regime responded by shooting such defectors. The defectors couldn't go home and keep out of the struggle because the regime tried to hunt them down and kill them and their families. So they had no choice but to become guerrilla fighters. They became the basis of the Free Syrian Army, which is really a collection of all sorts of militias fighting to defend liberated areas of Syria against the regime, its imperialist backers and ISIS.

DID ASSAD want to turn the revolution into a civil war?

YES. ALL of his counterrevolutionary violence was designed to produce a civil war. That probably sounds counterintuitive. Why would the state provoke the war against itself? Well, because it's a tried-and-tested technique. They've done it before, and it worked for them.

In the late 1970s, there was the beginning of a political movement against the regime, which included Islamists, nationalists, Communists and liberals. The regime opted to turn it into a military confrontation. After four years of savage repression, all that was left was the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which then staged an armed uprising in the city of Hama.

At which point, the regime said, "Great, it's a war situation!" They went in, and they razed the center of the ancient city and killed as many as 40,000 people. And that kept the Syrians quiet for another 30 years. They couldn't win against a peaceful political challenge in the end, but they could win a war.

They are following the same script this time. Assad knew that he couldn't survive a reform process in which all his crimes would come out. He and his closest advisors would end up, at best, in prison and stripped of their wealth. So instead, as they wrote on the walls, "Either al-Assad or we burn the country." But people didn't want Assad, so they burned the country.

The revolution has paid a price with its inevitable militarization. The Islamist militias have become stronger, because they could find funding, arms suppliers, and also a religious ideology to provide answers to the existential suffering people were enduring. Now you have a competing cacophony of different authoritarians in charge of different militias that have substituted for the original mass democratic character of the revolution.

WHAT ARE the prospects for the revolution today?

IT'S VERY hard to know whether to be optimistic or pessimistic, and like most people closely connected to Syria, I tend to veer between the two emotions.

On the one hand, the situation is apocalyptically awful. Almost half a million people have died out of a pre-war population of 23 million—the vast majority killed by the Assad regime. Twelve million people—a bit more than half the population—are homeless. The majority of those people are still in Syria. They're living in camps near the border fences. They're living in other people's houses or in destroyed buildings. Sometimes they're living on relatives' couches and floors. Sometimes they're

just living under bushes.

Most Syrians at this stage don't have the money—about \$1,000—that it costs to get out of the country. You have to pay somebody to get you past checkpoints and to smuggle you over a border. And most of the borders are now closed. Those who do get out are suffering in terrible conditions in surrounding countries, and those lucky enough not to die in the Mediterranean and make it to Europe are now being scapegoated for ISIS's terrorist attacks.

This is an absolutely desperate situation. The heritage of Syria is disappearing. Things like the minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, which survived Mongol invasions and earthquakes—it didn't survive Assad's war. Palmyra, Tadmor, the amazing city in the desert that belonged to Queen Zenobia 2,000 years ago—beautiful ruins of which half have now been blown up by the Islamic State. I will never be able to show those to my children.

That is an absolute tragedy for the Syrian people. But it has not turned out well for Assad either. His regime doesn't exist anymore in the way that it did in 2011. Now foreign states like Russia and Iran and local warlords make all the decisions that matter in Syria, even in the areas that Assad nominally controls.

Other foreign powers are angling to control Syria's future. The U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to name a few of the players, will be trying to hammer a deal out among themselves. The Syrian people are not being consulted. And as I said, we're heading towards partition scenarios at the moment, which won't satisfy any Syrian. So it looks, in that sense, very depressing indeed.

On the other hand, I continue to be amazed and inspired by the ability of Syrians to come out to protest for democracy, freedom and dignity. The fact that those people not only survive in these destroyed Syrian cities, but also continue to struggle against the regime, the foreign powers and counterrevolutionary jihadism is a miracle.

There's still a hard core of activists and fighters and medical workers and artists and intellectuals who remain committed to the original aims of the revolution, which are non-sectarian, democratic and based on the desire for human freedom. That proves that however many people you kill, you can't snuff out the desire for liberation.

Once Syrians started speaking and expressing themselves and demanding their rights, they were never going to stop. So in that sense, in the long term, I still have some optimism.

P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/03/31/how-did-syria-become-a-burning-country>