

Interview

## **Syria: “Build networks of popular resistance around a democratic charter”**

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**We are publishing here for the first time in English an interview with Gilbert Achcar, a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (SOAS). The interview was conducted in Arabic by Oudai al-Zoubi for the daily “Al-Quds Al-Arabi”, and published in its edition of August 25, 2012.**

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**Some left activists fear the Islamisation of the revolution, which has led them to oppose it or in any case not support it. What is your opinion as a Marxist on the position to be adopted towards the Syrian revolution?**

Gilbert Achcar - It is normal that all those who believe in democracy — and democracy obviously presupposes secularism — fear the arrival of a fundamentalist religious force which takes as its source of legislation sacred texts rather than the will of the people. We all fear that the great Arab uprising, on which we have based much hope, may be transformed into a reactionary regression. There is a historic precedent to this: the Iranian revolution which began as a democratic revolution and led to a fundamentalist state. This fear is then natural for whoever believes in democracy.

I add to this that the religious forces are in the best position to assume power at this stage in the Arab region. The left and nationalist forces are too weak or have been too weakened. But in spite of everything we note, I remain optimistic. There is indeed an enormous difference between the coming to power of Khomeini in Iran and that of the Islamists in the Arab revolts. Khomeini was the head of the Iranian revolution, he was its real leader, which is not the case of the current Islamic movements. They are not at the origin of the Arab revolutions, they have joined them. Also, as we can note in Tunisia and in Egypt, their coming to power coincides with the development of a very sharp critical spirit among the people in general, and the youth in particular.

Moreover, we are not talking about a finished revolution, but a protracted revolutionary process, which can last for many years and which is shaped by social-economic contradictions representing the main obstacles to development. These obstacles are linked to the profound nature of the existing social-political system, and not only to the corruption which is visible on the surface and denounced by all. Indeed, the Islamic movements have no serious programme to change this. It appears clearly from reading their programmes that they adhere to neoliberal recipes in the manner of the existing regimes or those which have been overthrown. That is why the process will continue until the resolution of the contradictions I mentioned.

**Is a class reading of the Syrian revolution possible?**

If it is about analysing the Syrian revolution as a “pure” class struggle, between workers and the bourgeoisie for example, then my reply is no. The battle in Syria is waged against a hereditary tyranny: the movement is made up of workers, peasants and petit-bourgeois, and even fractions of the bourgeoisie. The Syrian revolution in its current phase is above all a democratic revolution, in the context of a dynamic shaped by the socio-economic contradictions I have mentioned. Resolving the latter over the long term will only be possible by discarding the current class structure, and by adopting development policies centred on the state, but in a popular democratic framework instead of a dictatorial one as was the case in the 1960s.

Eventually, when the people get rid of the tyranny, class divisions will inevitably appear in the revolutionary process. But for now it is the people in all its class components which wants to get rid of the tyranny. Whoever considers themselves of the left can only stand alongside the Syrian people in its struggle against tyranny.

### **You predicted the inevitable militarisation of the revolution from its initial phase. Why?**

Look at Egypt and Tunisia where peaceful revolutions have succeeded. The appeal launched on January 25, 2011 in Egypt came as the culmination of big workers’ strikes as well as political protests led by movements like Kifaya (“Enough!”), with a strong presence in the street of organised religious opposition forces. The demonstrations of January 25 set the gunpowder alight, but it was the prior struggles which accumulated this gunpowder. In Syria, on the contrary, extreme repression was the main reason for the delay in the extension of the movement to the country’s main cities, which had known no prior accumulation of strikes and protests as was the case in Egypt or Tunisia. The delay of the extension was not due to the fact that these cities were loyal to the regime, as has been claimed. The reason for the delay of the entry into rebellion of the cities of Aleppo and Damascus is not so much the significance of the social base of the regimes as the massive deployment of the forces of repression and the absence of a prior accumulation of struggles.

I come here to the question of militarisation. I am not a fan of militarisation, I prefer peaceful revolutionary processes. Militarisation leads to colossal destruction and to a degeneration of the opposition that threatens the nascent democracy, because military organisations are rarely democratic.

However — since the beginning, as you have stressed — I have affirmed that the militarisation of the Syrian revolution was unavoidable. With the beginning of the formation of the groups of the Free Syrian Army, members of the Syrian National Council called for a direct foreign intervention which, in their mind, would have allowed militarisation to be controlled. This request is dangerous and I am against it. Others — in particular members of the National Coordination Committee — called for the movement to confine itself to peaceful struggle, condemning militarisation.

From my viewpoint, these two positions reflect a strategic deficiency. The Syrian regime is fundamentally different from those of Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, as previously in Libya, there is an organic link between the military institution and the ruling family, whereas in Egypt and Tunisia, Mubarak and Ben Ali originated from the military institution rather than being its creators. The reorganisation of the state, and in particular of its armed forces, by Gaddafi and Hafez al-Assad made the peaceful overthrow of their regimes completely illusory.

It is well known that Hafez al-Assad rebuilt the Syrian armed forces on sectarian bases. In noting that, we do not at all condemn one specific religious community [Alawite]; we denounce rather the regime’s sectarianism. It is not about replacing one sectarianism with another, but of reconstructing the state on non-sectarian bases.

In countries like Libya or Syria one cannot bet on the abandonment of the tyrant by elite military units. The peaceful overthrow of the regime in countries such as these is impossible. Revolutions, like national liberation struggles, cannot always achieve victory in a peaceful fashion. The strategy is not defined according to what is desirable, but according to the nature of the state. That is why I have said from the beginning that the overthrow of the Syrian regime could only be achieved through armed struggle.

However, the call for foreign intervention is a serious fault. I have listed the risks that such an intervention would create in my contribution to a meeting of the Syrian opposition in Stockholm, and in the article published subsequently in the Beirut daily "Al Akhbar". Indeed, some of these risks have led the Western states themselves to reject militarisation from the beginning. Western leaders view are very much worried today by the expansion of Al-Qaeda in Syria; they are very concerned. And if they begin now to envisage a direct intervention, this is certainly not out of love for the Syrian people, but solely because of their fear of Al-Qaeda and similar groups. In Libya too, it was a similar fear of a drift in the situation, as well as the attempt to take control of the process of change which motivated their intervention. But their attempt failed.

There is a third illusion in relation to Syria, propagated by the USA: this is the so-called Yemeni solution which Obama among others has advocated. That would consist in making an agreement with Assad's main sponsor, Russia, so that it sidelines him in the same way that the Saudis sidelined Ali Abdallah Saleh. This is a pure illusion. As I have indicated, the central state apparatuses are organically linked to the ruling family in Syria and are built on sectarian bases. It is unthinkable that they would abandon power without being defeated on the ground, even if we posit a departure of Bashar al-Assad in the same way as Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen.

These three illusions are the result of a strategic deficiency in the apprehension of reality and the differences between Syria, on the one hand, and Egypt, Tunisia and even Yemen, on the other hand. Due to this deficiency, the Syrian opposition failed to take the initiative to organise militarisation on sound bases. At the end of the day, democracy in Syria will only win by breaking the regime's apparatus, that is by dismantling the armed forces in order to rebuild them on bases which are neither sectarian nor dictatorial.

### **Some think that militarisation will lead to civil war. Has Syria entered into civil war?**

Certainly, for several months now. But civil war does not mean sectarian war. Civil war means any armed conflict opposing parts of the same society, as was the case in the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, or in France after the revolution of 1789, or Russia after 1917. Civil wars are not necessarily sectarian or religious wars. When I said more than a year ago that Syria was inevitably headed for civil war, I did not mean by that a sectarian war. I wanted only to stress the inevitability of military confrontation without which the regime cannot be overthrown.

Besides, the regime sought, and still seeks, to unleash a sectarian war, aided in this by some reactionary forces in the opposition. We saw how from the early days the regime attributed the uprising to Salafist groups or Al-Qaeda. This propaganda from the regime delivered two messages: one addressed to the minorities and the other to the ordinary Sunni who reject Wahhabism, not to mention the third message addressed to Western countries. In reality, the more the conflict goes on, the stronger sectarian forces get. It is indispensable to prevent the sectarian logic from prevailing. For that the opposition should adopt a firm position against sectarian discourses.

On the other hand, the call for a strictly peaceful movement under the pretext of guarding against sectarianism, in the manner of some on the Syrian left, went along with a call for dialogue with the regime. It was obvious from the start that these calls would come to nothing. Left forces should have

adopted a radical position from the beginning of the movement, they should have called for the overthrow of the regime and not for an illusory dialogue with it. Despite my deep respect and friendship for some members of the Syrian left, I believe that these calls were, and remain, preaching in the wilderness.

**On the other hand, does militarisation not lead to the suppression of the peaceful popular character of the revolution?**

I have already said that the main strategic dilemma of the Syrian revolution is to succeed in combining the peaceful mass movement with the armed struggle. It is not conceivable, faced with a regime of the nature of the Syrian regime, that the peaceful struggle can continue infinitely. That would be equivalent to advocating that peaceful demonstrators continue to get slaughtered like sheep, day after day.

It is a classic dilemma in popular revolutions against tyrannical regimes that do not hesitate to kill. Under such conditions, it becomes necessary to create an armed wing of the revolution to protect the peaceful movement, and wage guerrilla warfare against the forces of the regime and its murderous militias (the “shabbiha”).

The slide to a sectarian war would lead, on the other hand, to the prolongation of the conflict and the widening of the Assad regime’s base rather than its shrinking. The solution is to build networks of popular resistance around a democratic charter which clearly rejects sectarianism, of which we already see beginnings. That is crucial for the future of the revolution and the state in Syria.

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**P.S.**

\* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

\* Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Among his books are *The Clash of Barbarisms*, which came out in a second expanded edition in 2006; a book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2008); and most recently *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010). His next book analyzing the Arab upheaval will come out in the spring of 2013.