

INTERVIEW

# Prospects for Syria's revolution

Friday 8 March 2013, by [NAISSE Ghayath](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2013).

**This month, the Syrian Revolution will mark its two-year anniversary. The regime has responded to a popular uprising with bullets, tanks and warplanes. Yet in spite of the repression, the Syrian people remain determined to win their freedom. The demonstrations continue, and the armed resistance is steadfast.**

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**IN HIS speech on January 6, the dictator Bashar Al-Assad proposed an initiative to form a new government and issue a new general amnesty. He called, once again, to “mobilize the entire nation” to confront the revolutionaries whom he described as “al-Qaeda terrorists.” He also called for a national reconciliation conference. What is the political significance of this initiative, and how will it affect the course of the revolution?**

**Ghayath Naisse** - THE TYRANT Bashar Al-Assad's speech came after months of silence and during a week that witnessed several diplomatic initiatives and maneuvers by major countries concerning Syria. In particular, he spoke of the December 11, 2012, meeting in Geneva of representatives of the American and Russian governments with Lakhdar Brahimi, the international envoy to Syria.

One of the tyrant's goals in his speech was to respond to this Geneva meeting and establish a maximum ceiling of what his regime deems acceptable in any potential initiative or negotiations. It was clear that the possibility of relinquishing power is absolutely unacceptable. He focused his speech on regurgitating claims that his regime is facing “foreign aggression” and that what is happening in Syria “is not a revolution” but merely gangs of “murderers and criminals” and “al-Qaeda terrorism.”

In fact, his speech was an explicit declaration of his determination to continue his war against the people who have mobilized to demand freedom, dignity and social justice.

Another goal of Assad's speech was to lift the spirits of his followers and loyalists, and to reassure them of his strength and resolve.

As for his mention of the regime's “political” solution, it amounted to nothing more than the repetition of previous promises that he never implemented. This solution does not address the minimum demands of the revolutionary masses and is therefore worthless. It has been rejected by most of the political opposition and all of the popular movement, which has concluded that this

bloody authoritarian regime cannot be reformed and must be overthrown.

**IMPERIAL POWERS have sought to impose a settlement in Syria similar to the one employed in Yemen—sacrifice the head of the regime while keeping the regime’s structures intact. They seem to have no interest in the complete collapse of a regime that has maintained total calm on the Israeli border since 1973. Does this calculation still stand?**

SINCE THE beginning of the revolution, the Revolutionary Left Current has taken a principled stand against any foreign military intervention. But we saw, at the same time, conservative and liberal sections of the opposition, especially the Syrian National Council, promoting intervention, and other sections, like the National Coordination Board for the Forces of Democratic Change and some remnants of the loyalist Communist Parties, promoting fear of intervention.

But these forces have been captivated by an illusion with no basis in actual fact. The actual military intervention currently underway is being led by Russia and Iran in support of the regime. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, on the other hand, have only given a very limited quantity of military aid to groups close to them politically.

The major imperialist powers, led by the United States, have always supported what they call an “orderly transition” in Syria, which means only superficial and partial changes to the structure of the regime—and not necessarily the same as the Yemen scenario.

For the last two years, these imperialist powers have been saying that the solution in Syria will be political and not military. This is for geostrategic reasons, including protecting the Zionist entity and preventing the revolution from succeeding and spreading to the entire Arab east, including the reactionary oil monarchies.

But this does not mean that imperialism’s regional allies, like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have all pushed to topple the regime by channeling support only to Islamic and Salafi Syrian forces. We started to notice a change in the Saudi position during a visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Egypt, where he called for a “political solution”—in contrast to the Qatari and Turkish position that still bets on military and financial support for Islamic and Salafi forces.

The Israeli position was expressed clearly by Ehud Barak, the former Israeli Defense Minister, who announced early last year that the solution in Syria must be based on the following rules: providing an honorable and safe exit for Bashar al-Assad and his close circle; preserving the army and unity of the military establishment; and maintaining the security apparatus and the Baath Party.

In any case, the imperial powers and the Zionist entity see the destruction of Syria’s infrastructure and the damage of its military capabilities as beneficial in the long run, because it will weaken Syria’s capabilities on all fronts, whatever new ruling power emerges.

**THE ECONOMIC situation is deteriorating because of international sanctions, the Syrian bourgeoisie squirreling away its money abroad (especially to Egypt) and now the participation of areas such as Aleppo, the nation’s industrial capital, in the revolution. Meanwhile, Syria’s political isolation is also quite severe due to the withdrawal of ambassadors of various countries, continuing defections from the regime, and military defections from the army. How much more do you expect the regime to be able to withstand after two years of popular protests? What is the regime banking on?**

IT IS true that the economic and social situation is deteriorating terribly, and there are continuous defections from the regime’s forces, which has hampered the functioning of some of its military

installations, as well as the sanctions.

But the dictatorship still retains enormous and devastating military capabilities. The regime's primary military and security institutions—which make up the core of its power—remain intact and effective. The defections during the last two years have not yet reached a level that would trigger their collapse. The regime's allies—Russia, Iran, the Iraqi government and Hezbollah—have provided it all manner of economic, military, security, logistic and diplomatic support.

Unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, which were toppled by revolutions and abandoned by their American and other allies, the Syrian regime enjoys ongoing support from allies that haven't abandoned it. For example, in the first week of the current year, Iran gave the Syrian regime a \$1 million loan after giving it \$5 billion last year.

This support from the regime's allies, in addition to the coherence of its security and military forces, has allowed it to prolong its brutal war against the Syrian people.

The regime believes it can exhaust millions of its citizens in the rebellious parts of the country by destroying the necessities of life, crushing basic social relations and inflicting enough pain to push the revolutionary masses to hopelessness, passivity and ultimately surrender.

The regime's brutality has already displaced about 4 million citizens who are now living under inhumane circumstances, destroyed around 1 million homes, and killed some 60,000 people. Almost 1 million more are now refugees in neighboring countries. It is a policy of total annihilation of the revolutionary strongholds, blockading them and cutting off the means for survival.

But the popular masses are determined to win salvation from the dictatorship, insisting on freedom, dignity and social justice. The people want more than ever to topple this criminal regime, and they are taking huge steps forward despite the enormity of pain and sacrifice.

### **THE MEDIA presents the armed resistance as “armed Islamist” groups. How accurate is this picture?**

TO SAY that the armed popular resistance is merely groups of “Islamists” is a lie that slanders the Syrian Revolution. This picture is promoted by the media and the satellite channels of the reactionary oil monarchies because they fear the success of the Syrian Revolution and the possibility that it might inspire revolutionary movements among their own populations. In particular, I am speaking of Al Jazeera, which is the ideological apparatus of the sheikdom of Qatar.

This does not deny the real increase of Syrian and non-Syrian Jihadist groups, especially since the beginning of last year, which are receiving military and financial support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

But we must always go back to facts on the ground: the armed resistance is a popular resistance first and foremost. One current within the broad popular uprising that had mobilized in the streets has picked up weapons in response to the regime's horrific killing of protesters and its abuse of civilians. Therefore, the armed resistance is that part of the rebellion that decided to pick up weapons to defend itself from the regime.

The number of fighters in the armed popular resistance is estimated at more than 100,000, while most reports indicate that Jihadist fighters number around 5,000. Let's assume double that number. Whatever the media may claim, these groups are miniscule compared to the size of the armed popular resistance. They have no tangible presence or popular influence.

It's important not to exaggerate their role, size or influence, but we also can't ignore their damage to the revolution. It's essential to expose their harmful practices and reactionary social and political positions. This is exactly what the popular movement is doing—by organizing ongoing protests to repeatedly criticize these Jihadist groups and their reactionary goals.

The Syrian Revolution today has two aspects. One is peaceful, the other armed. We are counting on the growth of the popular movement. And for the last year, the movement has not been based in the mosques, which was always a lame excuse made by some opportunists on the left to justify their alliance with the dictatorship. We also aim to restructure the armed work by tying it to the popular movement and the program of the popular revolution.

It is also necessary to build a mass revolutionary leadership independent of the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition, which represent the liberal and conservative opposition, because this is a precondition for establishing progressive horizons for the success of the revolution.

**DESPITE TALK of massive aid from American imperialism, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, there is actually a refusal by these countries to provide any military aid. How do you see the ability of the armed resistance, in light of its modest capabilities, to continue its battle and further impact the course of the revolution?**

EARLIER, I mentioned that Saudi Arabia and especially Qatar only give arms and financial support to Jihadist groups, and what you are saying is absolutely true. The armed popular resistance has received very little in the way of weapons and ammunition. Even the financial support hasn't been at levels pledged by countries that claim to be "friends of the Syrian people." The liberal opposition mentioned above has been releasing statement after statement exposing these countries' broken promises and their weak financial support.

The truth of the matter is that the Syrian National Council, which is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, has used the bulk of the Council's funding for the benefit of the Brotherhood by trying to buy loyalty through humanitarian relief efforts. Dozens of protests and masses of signs have condemned this, and the Muslim Brotherhood has largely failed in achieving its goal.

The armed popular resistance no longer puts any trust in the countries that pledge this kind of "friendship" with the Syrian people, nor do they trust the opposition groups mentioned above or the middle-of-the-road groups like the National Coordination Board for the Forces of Democratic Change. The armed popular resistance primarily arms itself by capturing weapons from the regime's weapons depots. It also locally manufactures some weapons, especially small rocket launchers.

To be sure, the armed popular resistance plays an important role in the Syrian people's battle to free themselves from the yoke of the ruling dictatorial junta, but it needs to effectively unite its brigades under the program of the Syrian popular revolution—and no other. At the same time, it is urgent to raise the tempo of and broaden the popular movement because it is the main carrier of the revolutionary and popular program, while forming a mass popular leadership to bring the armed popular resistance under its banner.

In spite of all the difficulties and challenges—and this has happened in all popular revolutions—the masses learn every day from their experiences, failures and suffering. And they figure out, on their own, the road to victory. The task of the revolutionary left is to fully participate in the people's struggle and articulate their revolutionary program.

**THE REGIME has attacked the civilian infrastructure in a third of Syria, refugees number more than 4 million, the population sorely lacks basic means of subsistence, and the**

**economy has almost stopped completely. How are people managing their affairs in the absence of the state? Have forms of self-management emerged?**

IT IS first useful to note that the basic impetus for the revolutionary processes in our countries is the socioeconomic dynamic. In other words, the fundamental social forces driving the popular Syrian Revolution are the popular classes of workers, toilers, the unemployed and the marginalized, in addition to students. But this revolution erupted in the absence of a mass revolutionary political leadership.

Nevertheless, the rebellious popular masses have established from below the tools to organize their struggle themselves, famously known as the revolutionary “coordinating committees.” Not satisfied with just that, we are also witnessing an important expansion of the popular “bodies of self-governance,” also from below, known as the local and city councils. These are still in their initial stages and have not spread nationally yet due to the shelling and destruction that has descended upon the rebellious and “liberated” areas.

In most cases, members are elected to these councils, which then take care of organizing to meet the daily needs of the population, including health care, welfare, housing and food.

As revolutionary Marxists, we have for decades been putting forward the idea of a socialist alternative that, unlike the Stalinist experience, is built on workers’ and toilers’ power and is based on their democratically elected councils. But the mass of our people did not have these experiences or memories. We were dependent on the experiences of other peoples and revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

But thanks to the ongoing revolutions in the region, we in Syria and throughout the Middle East now have the experience and expertise based on our daily lived experiences, which now form a part of our current and future revolutionary tradition.

This reminds me of Hegel’s saying: “The owl of Minerva takes flight only when the shades of night are gathering.”

**A QUARTER of the martyrs are Syrian students, and we hear the echoes of the students and youth organizing resistance in the universities of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. What is the scale of student involvement in the revolution? Which sectors have a prominent role on the ground in the protests and struggle?**

YES, STUDENTS have played an active and prominent role in the popular movement from the very beginning of the revolution. The students at the University of Aleppo, which is now called the University of the Revolution, were brutally massacred on January 15, 2013, when they were bombed by Air Force jets. More than 82 students were martyred and around 200 wounded. Students then demonstrated to protest this massacre on January 18.

But the student movement was not limited to the University of Aleppo. It included most Syrian universities, and especially the universities of Homs and Damascus. The youth and students are very active in organizing demonstrations and media work in the coordinating committees. Their activities did not stop for one moment, despite the murders and arrests. Students have participated in the wider popular demonstrations as well and have made up a high proportion of the martyrs. The student movement is the social group that as such has participated most in the revolution.

The popular classes are the driving force of the revolution—with workers at the forefront—but workers have generally participated as individuals and not as a class. This is due to the intense

repression that the labor movement has experienced for decades as well as the regime's control over the General Federation of Trade Unions. And this doesn't even account for the more than 3,000 factories that have shut down because of the dictatorship's brutal campaign of destruction.

Also fundamentally part of the revolution are the urban poor, the farmers and the unemployed. Syrian women also play an important and prominent role at all levels, with dozens known for their roles in demonstrations and coordinating committees. They have also paid a high price as victims of murder and detention.

The popular masses have invented many forms of struggle, including massive popular demonstrations that we saw in July of last year in Hama and Deir Ezzour; fast demonstrations (like flash mobs) that only last for several minutes; and demonstrations in neighborhoods with narrow streets in order to prevent the security forces from finding and cornering them, thus allowing protesters to dissipate in narrow alleys when faced with repression.

Other actions include night demonstrations, releasing balloons carrying revolutionary slogans, dyeing the fountains red in major city squares, raising the flags of the revolution in streets and balconies, renaming streets with names of the revolution's martyrs and, of course, a series of general strikes. The most recent one, in December 2012, was called the Strike of Dignity and lasted two days.

Every Friday, the masses raise their slogans, most of them united, in response to specific situations or to express their opinion regarding any matter of concern to the revolution. These are also a means to form a common mass consciousness and to generalize revolutionary experiences. Beyond this, there are many other forms of mass struggle.

**A SECTION of the traditional left opposes the Syrian Revolution and presents the revolutionary masses as unconscious pawns of imperialism. How does the revolutionary left intervene in both the peaceful and armed resistance? And what is its role?**

THE TRADITIONAL left in Syria, as well as regionally and internationally, has a miserable and opportunistic position towards revolutions, especially the Syrian Revolution. This has been clearly and finally exposed. During the last three years of revolutions in our region, there has been a realignment of the left based on its posture to the ongoing popular revolutions. This mirrors to some extent—without exaggeration—the realignment of the international left after the First World War.

On one side, there are those left forces that stand with the working masses' revolutions, and on the other side is a traitorous and opportunistic left, part of which takes a centrist position between the dictatorships and the rebellious masses and another part of which openly and brazenly stands with the dictatorships against the popular revolutions.

The pretexts to justify this betrayal of the popular revolutionary cause are many, but all equally bankrupt. There is the tired excuse of "anti-imperialism," as if Russia and the United States are not both imperialist countries. And there is the excuse of the "Islamist danger," as if the revolutionary processes are mere fruit that should ripen according to our whims and mechanically fall into the hands of the left—otherwise, they are not revolutions.

The revolutionary left in Syria, both in terms of its organizations and individuals, has actively engaged in the popular revolution from the beginning. As the Revolutionary Left Current, we presented a clear revolutionary program and strategy since mid-October 2011 called "The Transitional Program of the Revolutionary Left in Syria." We cannot, however, despite our comrades' intense enthusiasm, realistically intervene more broadly than our own modest efforts will allow in

the face of the enormity of tasks posed by the Syrian Revolution.

We are working to build and strengthen ourselves in the unfolding messiness of the ongoing revolutionary process, while the comrades of the revolutionary left engage in all possible forms of mass struggle, raising their banner in all arenas, and winning to their ranks the best movement activists and militants. But we are still far from playing a central and leading role in the revolution, because that requires building a mass revolutionary workers' party.

We are working towards that with all patience and determination, but we are still far from achieving it in the foreseeable future. Therefore, we call for the formation of a united front of the Syrian left forces that are part of the revolution in order to raise the capacity of the Syrian left in revolutionary work and increase its impact and influence in general.

And we are calling broadly to encourage the formation of popular local councils from below and to build an alternative revolutionary leadership that grows out of the revolutionary movement and frames the armed popular resistance. We are also working on building an international solidarity network with the Syrian popular revolution and the revolutionary left within it.

### **HOW DO you see the future of the Syrian Revolution playing out?**

IT IS clear that what is happening in our countries—and Tunisia and Egypt are proof—is not simply a political revolution aimed at superficial changes to the top of the regime. Nor are these revolutions with stages. We are witnessing revolutionary processes that will not stop at partial changes to the standing regimes, especially since the driving motivations, which we've mentioned, require more than just political reforms to be achieved. They require radical economic and social changes.

These revolutionary processes may go on for years and extend beyond the geographic borders of our region, as they have already. These are popular revolutions from below that push, without any doubt, toward the deepest political, economic and social changes in our countries. In other words, they are permanent revolutions.

The task of the revolutionary left is to push these revolutionary process forward by mobilizing the masses and increasing their level of revolutionary consciousness to the utmost degree, that is, towards social revolutions: socialism.

Like all revolutionary processes, their fate is not predetermined. They are processes that are open to many possibilities, depending on the balance of political and class forces, and the choices of the active forces within it. But at the same time, they are processes of great liberation for all society. Whatever twists and turns they have seen, the broad masses have forcefully entered the center stage of history in our countries. And there is no turning back.

The Syrian Revolution faces many difficulties, obstacles and challenges. The reactionary and imperialist governments, which falsely proclaim their friendship with the Syrian people, do not wish to see them succeed, because the Syrian Revolution's victory will mean the spread of revolutions like wildfire—throughout the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and beyond.

We can foresee their impact with the eruption of revolutionary activity in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain that took place after the uprising in Yemen. Despite all of this, and despite the Syrian Revolution's advances, retreats, twists and turns, we are deeply convinced, like the millions within the ranks of our rebellious masses, of our victory over the ruling dictatorial junta of the bourgeoisie.

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\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/03/07/prospects-for-syrias-revolution>

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