

ANALYSIS

What is the future of the Syrian revolution?

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Lee Sustar looks at the latest developments in the Syrian revolution—and the debate on the left over the character of the revolution and imperialist intervention.

AS THE Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad enters what could be a terminal crisis, imperialist forces are maneuvering to shape the outcome of the revolution.

This has prompted some on the left to write off the resistance as tools of the U.S. and its allies. But a closer look at the Syrian struggle shows that popular revolutionary forces remain the leading force in the resistance—and they have the potential to shape post-Assad Syria.

The 17-month-old crisis in Syria entered a critical new phase when Assad's military tried to provoke revolutionary fighters into a premature uprising in late July. By attacking rebel fighters with overwhelming force in the capital city of Damascus, the government apparently hoped to crush rebel forces before they could launch an insurrection.

Yet despite suffering heavy losses and being massively outgunned, the rebels—loosely grouped under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—were not defeated.

Meanwhile, to take the pressure off fighters in Damascus, rebel fighters launched an uprising in Syria's commercial and industrial hub of Aleppo. Assad was forced to deploy helicopters and fighter jets to that city, previously seen as a key bastion of support for the regime.

Syria's security chiefs apparently calculated that by pounding civilian areas, they would turn the wider population against the rebels as tens of thousands of people fled both Damascus and Aleppo. Instead, however, the resistance seems only to have become more entrenched in those cities [1]. Resistance forces in Aleppo even captured tanks [2], suggesting a new level of panic and desertion in the military.

By forcing the Syrian military to concentrate its forces on the country's two key cities, the rebels have been able to assert control of entire towns and regions, and even to harass military supply lines [3]. The urban warfare followed a bombing that killed four top Syrian security personnel [4], dramatically demonstrating that Assad's inner circle is now vulnerable.

With Assad's iron grip on Damascus and Aleppo now broken, the Syrian bourgeoisie—mostly Sunni Muslims—may finally be willing to desert the regime as a wave of factory closures in Aleppo [5] hammers them economically. This will compel Assad to try to further mobilize the regime's traditional base of support among religious minorities, chiefly the Alawite sect of Islam that is heavily represented in the upper reaches of the military and the security apparatus, as well as

Christians and Druze.

These developments set the stage for the defection of former Prime Minister Riyad Hijab. The U.S. and its allies responded by pledging greater support for the rebels.

IMPERIALIST INTERVENTION in Syria has led many on the international left—mistakenly—to write off Syrian revolutionary forces as having been hijacked by the U.S. and its regional proxies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. According to this logic, the international left and antiwar movement must confine themselves to opposing imperialist intervention and withhold support for the Syrian revolutionary movement. As British socialist John Rees put it [6],

“Some say we should limit ourselves to combining the slogans “Victory to the FSA” with “No Foreign Intervention” without also criticizing those in Syria calling for intervention. But this risks incoherence since the meaning of this position would be: “Support the FSA, some of whom are calling for Western intervention, but no to Western intervention.” Logic and politics decree that this is an unsatisfactory stance.”

To make his case for a singular focus on opposition to Western intervention in Syria, Rees exaggerates the anti-imperialist character of the Assad regime. In his lengthy article, he somehow neglects to mention that Syria joined the U.S. coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War and was rewarded with political dominance of neighboring Lebanon. Nor does Rees acknowledge that U.S. politicians like Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair John Kerry and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hailed Assad as a reformer and continued to try to make a deal with him [7], even after the regime launched its crackdown on the revolution.

In any case, it’s no great revelation that imperialism is trying to shape the outcome of the Syrian revolution. The U.S. has for months been sending guns and money to a select group of political fighters and grooming political operatives that it hopes will do the bidding of the U.S. and European powers [8].

SocialistWorker.org has been among publications on the left that have supported the Syrian revolution while criticizing leading elements of the Syrian National Council (SNC) for their attempts to make alliances with imperialism. Key members of the SNC have called for stepped-up intervention by Western powers [9], such as military action to establish safe havens for refugees on Syrian territory or the imposition of a no-fly zone to neutralize Assad’s air power.

But for Rees and some others on the left, that’s enough to write off not only the SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but also the Local Coordinating Councils (LCCs) that have organized heroic mass resistance for more than a year and half despite the most savage repression—mass arrests, torture, artillery attacks on civilian areas, massacres and, now, aerial bombardment.

Is it really the case that one of the most inspiring, self-organized revolutionary movements in recent decades has degenerated into a pliable tool of the West? Are we looking at a repeat of Libya, where NATO air strikes played the decisive role in turning the tide in the civil war? Are ultra-sectarian Islamist forces—backed by the Saudis and Qataris—becoming a dominant force?

The answer is no. While imperialist forces are angling to install a post-Assad leadership to their liking—preferably a military strongman, as Reuters reported [10]—the revolutionary movement has continued to develop in response to the struggle in Syria itself.

Moreover, there are well-documented divisions within the SNC and the FSA—and criticisms of both

from grassroots Syrian revolutionary forces on the ground in the LCCs. And does it make any sense to equate an SNC leader who calls for a no-fly zone and meets with State Department officials with a farmer who distributes AK-47s smuggled in from Turkey in order to defend a village from Syrian army tanks?

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IN FACT, the escalation of the armed resistance has exposed the contradictions of imperialist strategy in Syria. The hesitation of the U.S. and European powers to intervene militarily isn't primarily due to Russian and Chinese opposition in the UN Security Council. If Washington wanted to mount a direct attack on Syria, it would put together a "coalition of the willing" and do it.

Instead, the U.S. has so far refused to give heavy weapons to the FSA, which means Turkey has kept a lid on arms flows to the rebels. Thus, fighters can obtain AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, but not anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons (the recent downing of a Syrian fighter jet was apparently a lucky hit from heavy machine gun fire [[11](#)]).

The question of Syria's long oppressed Kurdish minority—ignored entirely by Rees—is another big problem for imperialism. Turkey has banned Kurdish parties from participating in SNC meetings in that country, and the SNC has had a terrible position on Kurdish self-determination, insisting on the Arab character of Syria.

In the hopes of peeling off Kurdish support for the revolution, Assad granted citizenship to the 250,000 of Syrian Kurds who had been considered stateless. As the armed resistance mounted, Assad pulled Syrian armed forces out of Kurdish areas and allowed the PYD—the Syrian arm of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)—to act as the de facto regional power.

This move was threatening to Turkey, which feared that Syria would become a base for renewed Kurdish armed resistance led by the PKK. A crisis was averted when Masoud Barzani, president of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, intervened to create a political deal between the PYD and other parties, making himself a broker for Syria's Kurds in relation both to Turkey and a post-Assad Syrian government.

That's another worry for the U.S., which would prefer to keep Syria intact and prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan that could destabilize the Kurdish region in NATO ally Turkey.

Given this risk of a breakup of the Syrian state and the outbreak of a wider civil war in a country stocked with heavy arms—including chemical weapons—the U.S. has had to bide its time.

Even a "limited" intervention, such as the creation of a no-fly zone, would require a massive bombardment of Syrian anti-aircraft positions in densely populated areas. This would create a backlash against the U.S., as every Syrian knows the devastating impact of the U.S. war and occupation in neighboring Iraq.

For these reasons, imperialist forces have so far carefully calibrated their support for the rebels to foster a prolonged, low-grade guerilla war to grind down the regime. One hope is clearly to buy time for the U.S. to encourage the Syrian military brass to mount a coup against Assad, which could then be dressed up as a civilian transitional government fronted by the most pro-Western elements of the SNC.

By attempting to keep as much of the Syrian state intact as possible, the U.S. and its allies want to pre-empt popular, democratic revolutionary councils modeled on the LCCs. The U.S. doesn't want an

accountable Syrian government that reflects the opinion of the majority of the population, since this would almost certainly create a crisis on the border of the U.S.'s key ally, Israel.

If the U.S. wanted to channel the revolution into a contained armed struggle, so too did Assad. The regime's atrocities against Sunnis were designed to provoke counter-atrocities against Alawites and Christians and drive them further into Assad's arms.

Despite horrific massacres by Syrian armed forces and the gangs known as shabiha, sectarian violence hasn't taken place on a large scale, though the dangers of such a degeneration are serious. Even so, the support of religious minorities for the regime is cracking. Walid Jumblatt, the Druze Lebanese politician who is seen as the leader of his co-religionists in Syria, came out against Assad months ago.

One key headache for imperialism is the potential for jihadist and al-Qaeda forces to get a foothold in Syria, as they did in Iraq. The U.S. decision to rely on Saudi Arabia and Qatar to run guns and money to rebel forces has created an opening for those elements. So there are jihadist and sectarian elements in the field that reportedly are attracting young fighters because of their superior discipline and armaments [12].

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RATHER THAN unleashing a Libyan-style intervention, the U.S. and its allies have waited for the revolutionary upsurge to weaken the regime enough to force out Assad without becoming strong enough to carry out a democratic transformation of Syrian society.

The issue isn't whether Syrian revolutionaries obtain some weapons from the West, but whether imperialism has been able to assert control over the movement. Just because the U.S. aims to manipulate the Syrian revolution doesn't mean it will succeed.

This is an old question for the left. The CIA, for example, did its best to influence Solidarnosc mass workers movement that shook the Stalinist regime in Poland in 1980 and the democratic revolutions that swept the old Eastern European bloc a decade later. But that didn't stop supporters of workers' rights and genuine socialism around the world from supporting those struggles.

To be sure, the militarization of the resistance—something the Assad regime did its utmost to force with its massive repression—carries great political dangers for the fate of the revolution. The risk is that elite groups of fighters come to "make the revolution," substituting themselves for the self-activity of the mass movement.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the Syrian working class movement is weak. Independent unions were banned, and much of the Syrian left has acted as an apologist for, if not a satellite of, the Baath Party regime for decades. So while the popular movement did mount what it called general strikes in some cities in the early months of the revolution, these were, in fact, civil strikes, in which business owners and shopkeepers voluntarily shut down operations to support mass protests.

But given the ferocious repression by Syrian forces, it isn't possible to simply counterpose civil resistance to armed struggle. It would be absurd to expect the Syrian people to refuse to use guns from any sources as they defend themselves against Assad's barbarism.

Nevertheless, members of the LCCs have been frustrated by their lack of political control over FSA militias. Some LCCs coexist with armed fighters. In some areas, where the Syrian state has essentially withdrawn, LCCs administer towns devastated by attacks and dole out food and charity.

In other areas, the FSA—which, again, is comprised of disparate elements—operate autonomously.

Now, after more than a year of mass civil resistance against repression, the armed struggle has taken center stage. But if the rebels win, it won't be because they've achieved superior military firepower, but because the social base of the regime collapses.

Even if Assad retains the loyalty of most members of religious minorities, he will fall if the popular support for the revolution compels the Syrian bourgeoisie to abandon him. Long tied to the regime through patronage from state-owned enterprises and, more recently, benefits from market-type reforms, Syrian capitalists are being forced to choose between a state that can no longer protect their interests and a working class, poor and peasant uprising that threatens their wealth and power.

Imperialist forces will do their best to contain that movement from below. But in the end, class conflicts, as well as the armed resistance, will play the decisive role in the outcome of the Syrian revolution.

Lee Sustar, August 16, 2012

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2012/08/16/future-of-syrias-revolution>

Footnotes

[1] <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-battle-aleppo-7319>

[2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9447682/Syrian-rebels-use-captured-army-tanks-to-attack-Aleppo-airforce-base.html>

[3] <http://www.economist.com/node/21560296>

[4] <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/22/world/la-fg-syria-damascus-20120722>

[5] <http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v7/newsworld.php?id=687087>

[6] <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/theory/157-international/15938-syria-empire-and-revolution-a-reply-to-the-critics-of-the-anti-war-movement-->

[7] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/syrias-reformer/2011/03/31/AFy4JFCC_story.html

[8] http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/20/inside_the_secret_effort_to_plan_for_a_post_assad_syria

[9] <http://socialistworker.org/2012/04/24/stalemate-in-syria>

[10] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/30/us-syria-crisis-usa-idUSBRE86T1KP20120730>

[11] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/syrian-fighter-jet-crashes-rebels-claim-they-shot-it-down/2012/08/13/104b98ac-e555-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19_blog.html

[12] <http://www.economist.com/node/21560296>