

SPEECH

# Understanding Syria's revolution today

Friday 12 July 2013, by [KHALIL Yusef](#) (Date first published: July 2013).

**What should the international left say and do about Syria? The uprising against Bashar al-Assad and his regime is one of the most heroic and determined of the Arab Spring that began more than two years ago. But the U.S. government and other powers are plainly attempting to intervene in Syria, often through a relationship with sections of the uprising.**

**In this edited and expanded version of a speech given at the Socialism 2013 conference in Chicago, Yusef Khalil challenges some of the left's prevailing ideas about Syria and looks at the challenges for revolutionaries. The speech was delivered days before Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was forced from power in the wake of mass protests.**

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IT WOULD be very easy in a presentation on U.S. imperialism in the Middle East to state that the U.S. and NATO are fueling a civil war in Syria by arming the rebels, and that they are lying about the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons as a fig leaf for foreign intervention. Then we pat ourselves on the back for exposing this latest attempt by U.S. imperialism to control the region—and, for good measure, denounce Syrian revolutionaries as al-Qaeda terrorists allied with Washington.

Some may be content with that explanation, but I think that's a simplistic view that doesn't accurately represent what's happening.

The noise from Washington about the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons may sound like a simple replay of the Bush-era lies that led to the war on Iraq. But there is a major difference between then and now. That difference is the Arab uprisings generally and the Syrian Revolution in particular. Some reports are completely out-of-touch when they talk about a Syrian civil war with no mention of the popular movement and the profound changes that Syrians have achieved.

In the last two years, the Syrian people have risen up against Syria's dictatorial President Bashar al-Assad and the 40-year rule of his family. You cannot understand U.S. imperialism in the Middle East as it relates to Syria without taking into account the awakening and self-activity of the Arab masses.

## **Syria: Popular Revolution**

We need to challenge the idea that the Syrian Revolution is an imperialist plot hatched in Washington (a lie peddled by regime supporters) or that the West has any interest in a successful Syrian Revolution (a fantasy peddled by the liberal opposition). We also need to challenge the idea that the Arab Spring has come and gone, and that we are now witnessing an Arab Winter.

Instead, we need to view the Arab Spring as part of the global crisis of capitalism, which in the Arab countries was precipitated by a very rapid adoption of neoliberal economic policies (by both pro-imperialist and "anti"-imperialist regimes). So the struggle is not just a political one to replace regime figures at the top of the pyramid. It is also a basic fight for profound social and economic changes to address the underlying issues of tyranny, corruption, occupation, poverty, economic development, social justice, real representation and democracy—all of which cannot be resolved or delivered from the top or overnight.

So we should view what's happening as a revolutionary process, which is far from over and may continue for some years. But we also must realize that there are no such things as pure revolutions. By their nature, revolutions put into motion all kinds of social layers (some of which may hold reactionary ideas) involving millions of people in activity often for the first time in their lives.

These people are making their own history, but often times under some of the worst conditions imaginable, including decades of repression that have destroyed any independent political parties, unions or workers' organization (with the blessing of some leftist parties themselves). It is utterly ridiculous to expect a revolutionary movement to spring forth under these conditions and present to the world its fully formulated Marxist revolutionary program led by the working class.

We are also anti-imperialists and are opposed to U.S. bullying, invasions and occupations in the Middle East, but that doesn't mean we can wash our hands of the Syrian people simply because Washington is determined to interfere in their uprising. Genuine anti-imperialism doesn't mean that we ignore one of the greatest popular efforts to unseat an entrenched ruling class—a movement with such deep social roots that it has withstood the military might of an inhumanely violent dictatorship at a terrible cost: more than 90,000 people killed, hundreds of thousands injured and more than 5 million displaced internally and externally.

## **U.S. Imperialism in Middle East**

Since this is a panel about U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, let's take a historical step back to 1958 and see how U.S. imperialism was viewed by Arabs at the time. A declassified top-secret document from the National Security Council that year [\[1\]](#) brought to my attention by Noam Chomsky explains:

*"[The majority of Arabs] believe that the United States is seeking to protect its interest in Near East oil by supporting the status quo and opposing political or economic progress... [And there is] widespread belief that the United States desires to keep the Arab world disunited and is committed to work with 'reactionary' elements to that end."*

I don't know about you, but I think the National Security Council pretty much got it right, and Washington has only proved it over and over again since then by continuing to support dictatorships, work with reactionary elements and oppose democracy, all in order to protect Washington's access to the energy resources of the Middle East.

To say that the Arab uprisings have seriously upset the status quo would be an understatement. So let's look at the United States' goals for Syria, since that is the focus of my presentation:

1. Halt and derail the revolution, or at least empty it of its democratic content, and prevent it from spreading to U.S. allies or posing a threat to Israel.
2. Weaken Syria's (and by extension Iran's) military and regional influence by having the Assad regime and armed groups destroy the country in a contained manner.
3. But, and here's the pickle, at the same time prevent a rapid collapse of the state or a wider war (a joint interest shared with Russia).

## **The Gulf Monarchies vs. Iran**

Washington is tackling these goals on many levels and in different ways. On a regional level, it depends on Turkey, Jordan and the oil monarchies of the Gulf. Due to time limitations, I won't be able to speak much about Turkey and Jordan, but I do want to address the issue of the Gulf monarchies and their competition with Iran.

The Iranian regime has sided heavily with its main Arab ally by propping up the Syrian dictatorship with significant economic and military assistance. Qatar and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, see the Syrian Revolution as an opportunity to weaken Iran's regional influence. Qatar, the main benefactor of the Muslim Brotherhood, is locked in a major rivalry with Iran over who gets to export the enormous reserves of natural gas in the region. Will it travel through an Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, or will it start in Qatar and proceed through a Western-oriented regime in Syria towards Europe?

So the monarchies started funneling arms and money to select exiled and armed Syrian groups. They are so far playing within parameters set by the U.S. banning the import of heavy weapons, but they are sometimes at odds with each other and the U.S., as they all try to purchase absolute loyalties from groups on the ground. This has contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition and revolutionary forces, the setting up of competing bodies, and the promotion of counterrevolutionary and reactionary armed groups against the will of Syrian activists.

In addition, the Gulf monarchies are very much threatened by any democratic movement in the Middle East, lest it spreads to their kingdoms. So they are playing a counterrevolutionary role by pushing the Arab uprisings (especially in Syria) into a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias to empty them of their revolutionary content and deflect them.

## **The Muslim Brotherhood**

In that, they are assisted by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the dominant force in the exile councils and coalitions, and claims to speak in the name of the Syrian Revolution, but is in fact not representative of the movement on the ground. The Brotherhood is trying to co-opt the revolution and also frame it as a religious fight between Sunnis and Shiites.

Outrageously, the Syrian National Council, which is one of the main exile opposition groups dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, recently congratulated Qatar after its Emir transferred power to his son. They called it a “pioneering and unprecedented step that gives the Arab Spring an additional big boost.” Never mind that that the Arab uprisings were against succession and single-family rule. This shows that the Muslim Brotherhood’s agenda is opposed to the aspirations of millions of Syrians and others in the region.

While we should oppose the Brotherhood’s power grab, we should also understand that the region could very well pass through a period of “political Islam” in power (though perhaps not in Syria, at the rate they’re going) in order for the Arab masses to learn from experience that the slogans of the Muslim Brotherhood are empty.

Just because the Brotherhood may find itself holding the reins of power doesn’t mean that they will stay in power—or that they can rule as they wish without challenge. Just look at Egypt, which in a couple of days is expected to witness the largest demonstrations since January 25, 2011, but against the Brotherhood this time.

## Sectarianism

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood has the nerve to cut diplomatic ties with the Syrian government and claim that he (and the Egyptian army!) stand with the Syrian uprising for freedom—all while threatening to use violence against Egyptian demonstrators to maintain his own grip on power. Of course, Morsi has maintained diplomatic ties with Israel.

Also alarming is the overt sectarianism and call for Egyptian Sunni militants to go fight in Syria, despite repeated announcements by Syrian revolutionaries in the last two years that they don’t need or want foreign fighters. Again, this has nothing to do with the popular revolt of the Syrian people and more to do with a counterrevolutionary strategy to sink the Arab uprisings in a quagmire of sectarianism.

But to be fair, this sectarianism wasn’t simply imported from the outside. The Assad regime may claim that it is secular and nationalist, but its founder Hafez al-Assad built his rule on absolute loyalty from his family and clan circles, and the regime’s security forces and elite units are heavily based on the president’s sect. He then politicized all other religious institutions from other sects and turned them into appendages of his rule.

The current fanning of the sectarian flames, however, actually began with the Assad regime using sectarian death squads in the early days of the revolution to push it in a sectarian direction, and his security forces have pursued an explicitly sectarian agenda to divide villages and towns across Syria and set them against each other.

And unfortunately, sectarianism has proven to be an extremely effective counterrevolutionary strategy. It is, I think, one of the most dangerous threats the region faces. Whether that strategy has succeeded in turning the revolutionary tide is a matter of debate, but its effects have been undeniably disastrous.

That’s not to say that there’s nothing that can be done. There have been popular demonstrations in many liberated areas of Syria against sectarian groups enforcing their religious views or using terror tactics against the population. As the widely read revolutionary blog Syria Freedom Forever puts it:

*"The only way to stop the terrorism and the use of sectarianism by both the Syrian regime and*

*groups linked to al-Qaeda is the continuation of the revolution until the downfall of the regime and the victory of the masses for the objectives of the uprising: freedom and social justice. The only way to defeat these evils is the empowerment and the self-organization of the popular classes and not agreements made by imperialist powers, the criminal regime and an opportunist section of the Syrian opposition at the expense of the revolutionary masses.*

It is in the liberated regions of Syria, which got rid of the regime, that we have seen growing and increasing opposition to Jabhat al Nusra and similar reactionary groups. It is not to say that this is a mechanical phenomenon, but it is clear that the overthrow of the regime and the strengthening of the self-organization of the masses is the best way to build a society based on freedom and dignity that can oppose reactionary and authoritarian groups."

## **International Conferences**

Another strategy pursued by U.S. imperialism that has been a disaster for the Syrian Revolution is the convening of international conferences, like the upcoming one in Geneva, where imperial (basically the U.S. and Russia) and regional powers try to hash out mutual agreements to superimpose on the Syrian Revolution. The U.S. wants a transitional government that includes some friendly remnants of the regime—in order to maintain “stability”—alongside “moderate” opposition figures. The biggest disagreement with Russia is the role that Assad will play in a future government (although the U.S. seems willing to defer that discussion).

You can imagine the scramble for seats and horse-trading going on behind the scenes in the run-up to these conferences. It is total opportunism by exiled groups—at the expense of the martyrs and revolutionaries on the ground—and is meant to pull the rug out from under them to circumvent any genuine democratic challenge from below.

It is in this context that the issues of chemical weapons, arming the rebels and recent regime “victories” must be understood. The timing is not coincidental, since all sides are trying to improve their positions at the negotiating table before they have a “peace” conference.

## **Chemical Weapons**

After the Iraq War, I think we are all rightly suspicious anytime Washington starts talking about weapons of mass destruction. And after more than 90,000 Syrians have been killed by conventional weapons, why is Obama drawing the line when 150 people are killed by sarin gas?

So let’s look at how this has actually played out.

Instead of running with it, Obama initially kept shuffling his feet and moving his red lines. There was no immediate push for international intervention. In fact, there is no international consensus that direct intervention should occur, and instead, this is being used more politically.

Actually, the aggressive push for military intervention from the more hawkish McCain camp isn’t so much because Assad has or used chemical weapons, but because they fear that he might lose control of these chemical weapons, and they end up “falling into the hands of the jihadists.”

## **Arms and No-Fly Zones**

The United States seems more concerned about radical jihadists than the Assad regime and has used that to justify not sending arms (both the U.S. and Israel don't want those elements to come to power because they are indeed hostile to the U.S. and Israel). In fact, the CIA has drawn up contingency plans for drone strikes against these groups if necessary. The CIA is also trying to limit the kind of weapons that are allowed into Syria. Small arms are okay, but no heavy weapons, like shoulder-fired anti-aircraft systems, are allowed.

There have been many reports of arms deals (especially from Libya) that were supposed to include heavy weapons, but when the shipments arrived in Turkey, only the lighter weapons were there. The accepted explanation is that the U.S. simply does not trust Syrians of any stripe with weapons that can be used against Israel, and is intercepting and pulling those weapons out. Besides, many revolutionaries have been complaining for months about what appears to be a deliberate strategy to allow only enough weapons in to keep the fight going, without letting the resistance get the upper hand.

More recently, there has been talk about the U.S. sending arms directly to the rebels. This has coincided with two things: 1) recent Syrian regime victories that the U.S. feels could weaken its own position at the Geneva peace conference, and 2) the need to maintain "influence" over the Syrian groups that have threatened not to attend the conference.

But remember that Uncle Sam never gives anyone something for nothing, as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century American socialist John Reed said. Everything comes with a condition. Uncle Sam will let you have access to weapons if you come to the conference. He'll throw in some weapons himself, if you agree to his terms at the conference.

So on the ground, this is unlikely to be a game-changer in favor of the revolution, but rather more of the same: give them enough to fight each other into a stalemate so they can be more susceptible to pressure from the outside.

In fact, the U.S. has been trying to find a Yemen-style solution since last year, where the president steps aside, but the regime stays intact. But they haven't been able to force it. The revolutionaries didn't want it, and of course, Assad doesn't want it. So it didn't go too far at the time. But if you weaken the regime and get a pliant opportunist exiled government to sign off on it, they they'll try to force it on the revolutionaries. That's what round two of the Geneva meeting is about.

But I see a more fundamental problem with appealing to governments to arm the revolutionaries. It seems to me to be unrealistic because state-sponsored arms are never given to democratically controlled organizations. The U.S. prefers to deal with "military councils" of pliant generals and commanders, who in this case do not control much on the ground.

The problem for American imperialism is that most armed groups on the ground are actually self-organized on the local level. There is no unified command structure that the U.S. can effectively leverage over them, which is why Washington has been very hesitant to send arms.

Establishing a no-fly zone to stop Assad's hellish airstrikes is also very unlikely, since it's not as simple as setting up Patriot missile batteries. An effective no-fly zone needs to be actively backed up by military force, invariably running the risk of further entanglement, which again the U.S. seems keen to avoid, at least for now.

That calculus, of course, could change as the Obama administration weighs the risk of having no

influence over the course of events. If things start falling apart, the U.S. could very well decide that it's better off intervening directly with its military.

But the question of arms procurement by the revolutionaries will remain very significant at this heavily militarized stage. An appeal for Western weapons is an understandable (but I think, dangerous) attempt to level that playing field. I understand that people need to defend themselves against the military machine of the regime, or be slaughtered. Faced with those conditions, you will accept any help you can get. The blame here isn't on those seeking to defend themselves, but on the overwhelmingly massive "military solution" that Assad has unleashed on Syrians and shows no signs of halting.

But winning the struggle by purely military means is highly improbable. And the fragmentation and sectarianism brought on by the reactionary Sunni groups is helping the regime destroy the social fabric in Syria.

Faced with these circumstances, the revolutionary left in Syria is aiming to bring the mass, civil, "unarmed" movement out of the shadows in order to unite it under popular control with the armed resistance. This is an enormous undertaking since it means a simultaneous struggle against the dictatorship and against some of the well-funded reactionary Islamist groups. This is a life-or-death struggle for the Syrian Revolution.

## **Resistance**

The last point I want to make is about the entry of Hezbollah, the Lebanese resistance party, into the fighting in Syria on the regime's side. I think this highlights Assad's desperation as he seeks direct military support from his allies and attempts to advance his bargaining position before the Geneva conference this summer. Hezbollah is admired by millions across the Arab world as a leading resistance force against Israel, especially after its bold defense of Lebanon against Israel's assault in 2006, but it has now turned its national resistance weapons inwards against the popular resistance of the Syrian people.

Hezbollah, like other official Arab and Palestinian resistance parties, has a national liberation program that is generally anti-colonial but does not link it to an understanding of the deeper root causes of colonialism and imperialism. The social and economic conditions that give rise to occupation and imperialism (and the resistance against them) are the same conditions that have entrenched Arab dictatorships and have led to aggressive neoliberal economic policies in the last decade (and the resistance against them).

The disaster is that not only have these resistance parties formed mutually beneficial relationships with these dictatorships, but they have also virtually compromised the entire liberation project by tying it to the survival of a single autocratic regime or person (for example, Assad), and in the process they have counterposed national liberation to a people's uprising.

Once one of the most respected political parties, Hezbollah has now exposed itself as more committed to Assad and the regional politics of Iran than to the people it professes to liberate. Using up its weapons and fighters in Syria is a dream come true for Israeli and American strategists who advocate a prolonged stalemate to weaken both Hezbollah and the Syrian fighters—similar to Washington's strategy to draw out the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's.

Although Israeli politicians talk happily about Assad's imminent fall, Israel has from the beginning been wary of a successful Syrian Revolution that might upset the 40-year truce it has enjoyed on its



border with Syria. Having stable dictatorships surrounding it was good for Israel—for both propaganda purposes (how many times have you heard that Israel is the “only democracy in the Middle East”?) and security purposes (there’s nothing like a highly repressive, but rhetorically nationalist, regime to keep a radicalizing Arab population under control).

After the Israeli air strikes against Syrian targets in January and May, Israel was very quick to emphasize that their strikes were not aimed at the regime itself. The targets were the long-range rockets that they claim were being transferred to Hezbollah, which is Israel’s real concern.

But Hezbollah’s actions—and sectarianism—are playing into Israel’s and Washington’s hands, since it mirrors the sectarianism of the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as all of those sides are pushing the Syrian Revolution into a sectarian civil war in order to defeat it—and so that it might serve as a lesson to all people of the region to think twice before rising up against their governments.

But the Syrian Revolution, if successful, will be a new model of resistance that challenges the hegemony of not only monarchies and dictatorships but also Islamic republics and “official” opposition and resistance parties.

But that success depends on the growth of a revolutionary left and a genuine liberation movement that neither supports tyrants in the name of “anti-imperialism,” nor tails imperialism in the name of “democracy.” Instead, it’s essential to understand dictatorship and imperialism as two sides of the same coin while fighting to overthrow them both.

**Yusef Khalil**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/11/understanding-syrias-revolution>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v12/d35>