

2011-2014: The roots and grassroots of the Syrian revolution

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Parti I

In a series commemorating the uprising's third anniversary, Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher answers key questions still circulating in the western digital commons. In this first part he offers us a short history of the socio-economic causes behind the protests that sprang up across Syria in March 2011.

Introduction

For nearly three years now, the majority of observers have analyzed the Syrian revolutionary process in geopolitical and sectarian terms, from above, ignoring the popular political and socio-economic dynamics on the ground. The threat of western intervention has only reinforced this idea of an opposition between two camps: the western states and the Gulf monarchies on one side, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other.

But we refuse to choose between these two camps, we refuse this logic of the “least harmful [evil]” which will only lead to the loss of the Syrian revolution and its objective: democracy, social justice and the rejection of sectarianism.

Lately, mainstream medias, whether in the west or in the Middle East, and western and regional governments, have been wanting us to believe that the Syrian revolution is dead and has transformed itself into a sectarian war between the Sunni majority and the religious and ethnic minorities on the other side, or in a similar trend, in an opposition between jihadists vs the Assad

regime. This last perspective has actually pushed many to join the camp composed of people who range from the conservative right wing to ill-informed anti-imperialists, who argue that Assad is a lesser evil to the Jihadists. In fact we should oppose both, because they nurture each other and are both seeking to establish an authoritarian system.

A similar comment could be made to a section of the left that has abandoned the Syrian revolution because it was allegedly hijacked, or those who have even not supported it since the beginning. For example, Tariq Ali has declared that he believes the popular movement has been,

“overtaken by the Muslim Brotherhood and groups to its Right, backed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Deserters from Assad were taken over by Turkey and France. So the character of the uprising changed by the end of the first twelve months. How can one not register this fact? The relationship of forces today does not favour any secular or progressive groups. To pretend otherwise is to be blinded by illusions or the requirements of intra-sectarian left politics.”

But there is no going back to the era of the Assad regime before the beginning of the revolution and to other forms of oppression. There is no alternative to the continuation of the revolution. One of the main slogans in Syria chanted by protesters is, “Rather death than humiliation”.

At the same time, we have to be clear that Islamist reactionary groups are a threat to the revolution. If they attack revolutionaries they must be condemned and challenged in whatever way it takes.

We need to oppose these counter-revolutionary forces, and build a third radical front struggling for the objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice and no to sectarianism.

The role of the revolutionary is to be on the side and struggle with these popular organizations struggling for freedom and dignity and to radicalize as much as possible the popular movement towards progressive objectives, while fighting against opportunists and reactionary forces opposing popular class interests.

We would like to end also by repeating that no solution can be achieved if the democratic and social issues are not dealt with together. Social demands cannot be separated from democratic demands : nor can they be subordinated ; they go in hand in hand.

The demise of independent politics in Syria

As Pierre Frank, French Trotskyist, once wrote : “Let us note that the greatest theoreticians of Marxism did not at all define the political nature of a bourgeois regime by the positions which the latter held in the field of foreign policy but solely and simply by the position it occupied in relation to the classes composing the nation”.

The roots of the revolutionary process are the absence of democracy and increasing social injustice as a result of neoliberal policies, especially as implemented to a high degree with the arrival to power of Bashar Al Assad in 2010.

The advent of Hafez Al Assad to power had marked a new era in Syria whereby independent popular organizations from trade unions to professional associations and civic associations came under the regime’s authority after harsh repression. Professional unions of doctors, lawyers, engineers and pharmacists were dissolved in 1980. They were the main organizations previously leading the struggle for the return of democratic freedoms and the lifting of the emergency rule. They were re-established but their leaders were replaced by state appointees.

In the school system, the regime targeted principally leftist teachers from different tendencies in the 1970s onwards, simultaneously allowing religious fundamentalist currents to develop. Independent intellectuals, such as Michel Kilo and Wadi Iskandar, and university teachers, including Rif'at Sioufi and Asef Shahine, critical of the régime, were also the targets of the regime.

No immunity was granted to university campuses, neither to teachers nor students. Security agencies could actually arrest students inside lecture halls and/or on campus and they did.

In a similar manner the regime imposed its domination on the bureaucracy of the trade union workers, and this is what hindered the labour struggle against neo-liberal policies pursued by the authoritarian regime since 2000, which has allowed the decline in the standard of living of the majority of the people, as well as political répression.

These were the main causes which launched the wave of protests, causes that in these years revolved around the economy. For example, in May, 2006, hundreds of workers protested outside the public construction company in Damascus and clashed with security forces, and at the same time that taxi drivers were going on strike in Aleppo.

More recently, the trade unions as an institution have been completely silent in the face of the repression of the Syrian people, and more specifically against the workers, even when the latter were the target of repression. Successful campaigns for general strikes and civil disobedience in Syria during December 2011 nevertheless paralysed large parts of the country, indicating a level of activism on the part of the working class and the exploited, who are indeed the heart of the Syrian revolution.

Repression also included all political parties that refused to submit to the diktat of Hafez Al Assad and the obligation to enter the umbrella of the National Progressive Front, where they had no right to any political activity except under the approval of the régime. These parties suffered from harsh repression ever since his advent to power, and not only at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the beginning of the seventies, various secular political parties, especially any with leftist tendencies were the targets of the regime, including the movement of February 23 (the radical tendency of the Baath close to Salah Jadid), the League of Communist Action (Rabita al amal al shuyu'i) whose members came mostly from the Alawi sect, and to a lesser extent the Communist Party Political Bureau (CPPB) of Ryad Turk. The National Assembly, so-called for including various leftist parties, was also severely repressed at the beginning of the 80s.

This trend has continued into the 2000s with the coming to power of Bashar Al Assad. An opposition movement gathering of intellectuals, artists, writers, scholars and even politicians who demanded reforms and democratization of the state between 2000 to 2006 was brutally repressed by the various wings of the security apparatus. This was accompanied also by the opening up of debate forums, and, between 2004 and 2006, by a multiplicity of sit-ins, a new political phenomenon in Syria. Calls for sit-ins came from political parties and civil organizations at one and the same time. The government of Bashar Al Assad cracked down on this movement, forums were actually closed, sit-ins were severely repressed and many intellectuals who launched this call for civil society and democratization were imprisoned. At the same time, the Kurdish Intifada of 2004 was severely crushed.

Syrian society came increasingly under the control of the regime in all its various components. The Baath Party was the only political organization which had the right to organize events, lectures and public demonstrations on the campus of a university or military barracks, or the right to publish and distribute a newspaper. Even the political parties allied to the regime in the National Progressive Front, did not have the right to organize, to issue statements or to have the slightest official

presence. The Baath also controlled an array of corporatist associations through which various societal sectors were brought under regime tutelage. They were called popular organizations and set their sights on incorporating peasants, youth and women.

The fight for social justice

Social justice has also been a key demand from Syria's popular masses. It is not a surprise that the biggest section of the Syrian revolutionary movement includes the economically disenfranchised rural and urban working and middle classes who are experiencing the accelerated imposition of neoliberal policies by Bashar Al Assad since his arrival to power.

These policies especially benefited a small oligarchy and a few of its clients. Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, embodied this mafia-style process of privatization led by the regime.

A process of privatization created new monopolies in the hands of the relatives of Bashar al-Assad, while the quality of goods and services declined. These neoliberal economic reforms allowed the appropriation of economic power for the benefit of the rich and powerful. The process of privatization of public companies has been made for the benefit of a few individuals close to the regime. At the same time the financial sector has developed inside the establishment of private banks, insurance firms, the Damascus stock exchange and money exchange bureaus.

Neoliberal policies undertaken by the regime have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, especially from the Arab Gulf, by liberalizing the Syrian economy for their benefit and at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians hit by inflation and the rising cost of living.

In addition to that, Syria's agricultural and public sector were also declining and no effective strategy to strengthen them have been suggested yet, which could jeopardize the country's alimentary autonomy and harm the population through the constant rise in prices of food and non-food basic needs.

The process of economic liberalization has created greater inequality in Syria. The poorest were struggling to help themselves in the new economy due to a lack of employment opportunities, while the middle class is plummeting towards the poverty line because their incomes have not kept up with inflation, which rose to 17% in 2008.

There is now 20-25% unemployment, reaching 55% for under-25s (in a country where 65% of the total population are under 30). The percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from eleven percent in 2000 to thirty-three percent in 2010. That is, around seven million Syrians living around or below the poverty line.

In agriculture, the dispossession of several hundred thousand farmers in the northeast as a result of the drought should not be thought of as merely a natural disaster. The increasingly intensive use of land by agro-businessmen — including land previously kept for grazing — as well as the illegal drilling of water wells facilitated by paying off local administrators has contributed to the crisis in agriculture.

Indeed, the expansion and intensification of land exploitation by large commercial farmers (agrobusiness), including land previously held for grazing, as well as the illegal drilling of wells and the establishment of selective water pipes meeting the requirements of the new landowners – all facilitated by the corruption of the local governments – have accelerated the agricultural crisis. According to the United Nations, in 2010, more than a million people have been forced to migrate

from the north-eastern region of Syria to urban centres.

The geography of the uprisings in Idlib and Deraa as well as other rural areas including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, historic bastions of the Baath Party that had not taken part on a massive scale in the insurrection of the 1980s, shows the involvement of the victims of neoliberalism in this revolution. Many from these groups joined the armed groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Part 2

In Part 2, the author dispels the myths used by the Syrian regime to legitimise itself. Is anything left of the regime's rhetoric of socialism, secularism and anti-imperialism?

The Syrian regime's rhetoric : socialist, secular, and anti-imperialist?

Syria has been able to portray itself as an anti-imperialist state through its support for the resistance in Lebanon and in Palestine for many years now, and has taken strong rhetorical positions in opposition to Israel.

But this stance is not based on anti-imperialist principles, but on putative 'national interests'. These are guided by the necessity of ensuring the security and continuity of the regime as well as a balance of power in diplomatic negotiations with Israel to recover the Golan Heights area seized in 1967.

The regime has actually collaborated with western imperialist governments on many occasions. It is the same regime that refused to assist the Palestinians and progressive Jordanian groups in overthrowing the conservative Hashemite regime in Jordan during the popular uprising in 1970, known as the Black September.

This is the same regime that crushed the Palestinians and the progressive movements in Lebanon in 1976 with the tacit agreement of the west, putting an end to their revolution, while participating in the imperialist war against Iraq in 1991 with the coalition led by the US.

They also participated in the 'war on terror' launched by President George W. Bush by collaborating on security issues. Israel has actually several times called on the US to ease the pressure on the Syrian régime, which has not shot a single bullet for the occupied Golan Heights since 1973.

Syria has not responded to direct attacks on its soil widely attributed to Israel, including a 2007 air strike on a suspected nuclear reactor or the assassination of a top Lebanese leader, Imad Moghniye, in the following year. It also has engaged in multiple rounds of peace talks, most recently in 2008. Although these talks have not yielded an agreement, their repeated failure has led to nothing worse than a continued chill.

Syrian officials have repeatedly declared their readiness to sign a peace agreement with Israel as soon as the occupation of the Golan Heights ended, while nothing was said on the Palestinian issue.

Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar Al Assad, went so far as to declare in May 2011 that if there is no stability in Syria, there will be no stability in Israel, adding that no one can guarantee what will occur if something happens to the Syrian regime. As a result, it is not hard to understand Israel's satisfaction with the status quo under the current Syrian regime.

The Palestinian refugees in Syria are fully aware of all this, and have increasingly been participating in the revolution alongside their Syrian brothers and sisters. They too have suffered from the regime's repression.

Secular

The regime under the rule of Bashar Al Assad has continued the policies of his father and has increased the collaboration with religious associations and conservative segments of the society in conjunction with the new social market economy and the implementation of accelerated neoliberal policies. This has meant the withdrawal of the state in social subventions and many essential public areas.

It should be known that prior to the commencement of the révolution, 30.1% of the population lived below the poverty line and almost two million people – or 11.4% of the population – had insufficient means to meet their basic needs. Real GDP growth and real per capita income has been decreasing since the beginning of the 90s. This has pushed the regime to continue its neoliberal policies and search for more private capital.

In the area of health, notably, the regime has significantly retreated, leaving the initiative increasingly to charitable associations, and especially religious ones. In 2004, around 300 associations were providing a total of 842 million Syrian Pounds (SP) to more than 72,000 families. The most successful and notorious of these was the Jama'at Zayd, which has deeprooted relations with the Damascus Sunni bourgeoisie, conducted by the Rifa'i brothers, despite their well known opposition to the regime in the past.

Despite having a rather opposing tone to the regime nowadays, the association did not hesitate to collaborate with them in the past, notably by obtaining the control of some new mosques at the expense of others, so that some of their members were able to procure important offices in various official religious institutions. Neoliberal policies have reinforced these religious associations, both Islamic and Christian, in Syria and in their hinterland of networks, increasing their role in society at the expense of the state.

Around 10,000 mosques and hundreds of religious schools were built and more than 200 conferences headed up by clerics were held in the cultural centres of important towns during the year 2007. At the same time, the high religious establishments of all the sects were used by the regime as ostensible representatives of "Syrian civil society", presenting an outward modern and consensual image of the country to any visiting foreign delegation.

Bashar Al Assad did not hesitate to meet with the famous Youssouf Al Qaradawi, currently "supporting" the revolution against the regime, who visited Damascus in 2009 at the head of the World Union of Oulemas.

The regime continued this policy of détente towards opposition Islamists that had commenced at the beginning of the nineties through the release of thousands of political prisoners in 1992, the tolerance of Islamists publications and of some movements as long as they refrained from political involvement. In 2001 for example, Shaykh Abu Al fath Al Bayanuni, the brother of the former head of the Muslim Brotherhood, was authorized to come back after 30 years of exile with his son, a rich businessman, who participated in the creation in 2010 of the first sexually segregated mall in Syria. These policies were also part of a strategy to create and deepen the rapprochement with the economic elites of Aleppo.

These governmental measures were accompanied by the censorship of literary and artistic works, while promoting a religious literature filling more and more the shelves of libraries and Islamizing the field of higher education.

This is true particularly in the humanities and expressed itself in the rather systematic referral to religious references of any scientific, social and cultural questions. The government also, in 2007, withdrew authorizations from two feminist organizations (the Social Initiative and one organization affiliated to the Communist Party linked to the regime) following pressure from various religious groups and personalities.

At the beginning of the uprising in April 2011, the regime actively sought to reach out to the conservative sectors of society by closing the country's only casino and scrapping a ruling that banned teachers from wearing the niqab. The regime banned the niqab from the classroom in July 2010, forcing hundreds of women out of teaching roles and into administrative positions. The regime also met with a number of religious dignitaries from different towns to try to appease the protest movement.

Part 3

Dominant narratives on Syria simplify it to a struggle between a dictatorship vs Islamic extremists, with Syrians included only as passive, voiceless, victims. In Part 3, Syrians are re-introduced as a people revolting against authoritarianism in both its secular and religious embodiments.

Only masses of people developing their own mobilization potential can realize change through collective action. This is the abc of revolutionary politics. But this abc, today, faces profound skepticism from numerous leftist milieus in the west. We are told that we are taking our desires for realities, that there may have been a revolutionary impulse in Syria two and a half years ago, but that things have changed since then. We are told that jihadism has taken over the fight against the regime, that it is no longer a revolution but a war, and that there is a need to choose a camp to find a concrete solution.

So much debate on the left is trapped in this 'campist' logic, often accompanied by conspiracy theories that blur the fundamental differences between left and right – especially the far-right.

Popular committees, elections, and civil administrations

From the outset of the revolution, the main forms of organization have been the popular committees at village, city and regional levels. The popular committees were the true spearheads of the movement that mobilized people for protest. Then, the regions liberated from the regime developed forms of self-gestation based on mass organization. Elected popular councils emerged to manage those liberated regions, proving that it was the regime that provoked anarchy, and not the people.

In some regions liberated from the regime's armed forces, civil administrations were also set up to make up for the absence of the state in taking charge of its basic duties in various fields, like schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, electricity, communications. Those civil administrations were implemented through elections and (or by) popular consensus and have to provide civil services, security and civil peace among their main tasks.

Free local elections in the 'liberated zones' occurred for the first time in 40 years in certain regions, neighbourhoods and villages. This was the case for instance in the city of Deir Ezzor, in late

February 2013.

Those local councils reflected the sense of responsibility and the capacity of citizens to take on initiatives to manage their own affairs relying on their managerial staff, their own experience and clean energy. Such initiatives took various forms, both in regions still under regime control and those that have freed themselves from it.

This does not mean that there are no limits to those popular councils, such as the lack of representation of women, or of certain minorities. One is not trying to embellish reality, but to establish the truth.

Another equally important element in the popular dynamic of the revolution was the proliferation of independent newspapers produced by people's organizations. The number of newspapers went from three before the revolution –all in the hands of the regime – to more than sixty written by these civic groups.

In the city of Deir Ezzor, in June, a campaign was launched by local activists to encourage citizens to take part to the process of monitoring and documentation of the practices of people's local councils. Among other things, the campaign encouraged the promotion of rights and the culture of human rights in society. There was a particular emphasis on the idea of rights and justice for all.

It is also important to remind everyone of the meeting in Rihania, a city on the Syrian-Turkish border, where the Free Syrian Union was formed on October 13, 2013, gathering about 106 military, media, and civil formations under its umbrella. These were all calling for a Free and Democratic Syria in which all sects and ethnicities would be treated equally. Although limited in some regards (e.g. the name Syrian Arab Republic was maintained as well as a call to return to the 'liberal' Constitution of 1950). But this initiative must clearly be included in any account of the democratic stakeholders in the revolution.

The example of Raqqa

A prominent example of self-management by the masses took place in the city of Raqqa, the only provincial capital that has been liberated from the regime (since March 2013), but is today occupied by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In the first few months following the liberation of the city and despite still enduring regular regime shelling, Raqqa was completely autonomous and it is the local population that managed all the local services for the collectivity.

These popular organizations, often led by young people, came on in leaps and bounds. They multiplied, to the extent that more than 42 social movements were officially registered by the end of May 2013. The people's committees organized various campaigns. The "revolutionary flag represents me" campaign consisted in painting the revolutionary flag in neighbourhoods and streets of the city, to oppose the Islamist attempt to impose the black Islamist flag throughout. On the cultural front, a play mocking the Assad regime was performed in the city centre and at the beginning of June, these organizations held an exhibition for art and local crafts. Centres were established to give the youth an occupation and to treat the psychological disorders resulting from the war. By the end of the year, Syrian baccalaureate exams in June and July were entirely organized by volunteers.

These types of experiences of self-management are found in many liberated regions. It is worth

noting that women play a great role in these movements and in the protests in general.

For instance, on June 18, 2013, in the city of Raqqa, a mass protest led by women was held in front of Jabhat al-Nusra's Islamist headquarters, where the protesters called for the liberation of incarcerated prisoners. Protesters shouted slogans against Jabhat al-Nusra that denounced their actions. The protesters did not hesitate to deploy the first slogan ever used in Damascus in February 2011: "the Syrian people refuse to be humiliated."

The group "Haquna" (meaning 'our right'), to which many women belong, have also organized many gatherings against the islamist groups in Raqqa, chorusing among other messages, "Raqqa is free, down with Jabhat al-Nusra."

During summer 2013, solidarity gatherings called for the libération of kidnapped activists held in islamist-held prisons. The protests enabled the liberation of some activists, but numerous others remain in jail to this day, like the famous Father Paolo, and others including Firas, the son of the intellectual Yassin Hajj Saleh.

In September 2013, following an attack ISIS against the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation in Raqqa, youth groups and activists organized a demonstration to condemn ISIS actions, in which they brandished a big cross in solidarity with the Syrian Christian community of the city. They also issued a statement saying that, "they demand the respect for all religions: Christian and Muslim are one: We have lived and will live as brothers. The people who practiced these actions only represent themselves and the Islamic religion is innocent of such acts"

In the people's organised resistance to the islamist groups in the city of Raqqa, like elsewhere, women have played a leading role. Suad Nofal, a school teacher, for example, has been protesting nearly daily for months against the authoritarian practices of ISIS, demanding the release of political prisoners.

Opposing authoritarianism, religious or secular

Similar protests contesting the authoritarian and reactionary practices of the islamists took place in Aleppo, in Mayadin, al-Qusayr and other cities like Kafranbel.

In the neighbourhood of Bustan Qasr, in Aleppo, the local population has protested numerous times to denounce the actions of the Sharia Council of Aleppo, which contains many Islamist groups. On August 23, 2013, for instance, the protesters of Bustan Qasr, while condemning the massacre through chemical weapons committed by the regime against people in Eastern Ghouta, were also calling for the liberation of the famous activist Abu Maryam, once more jailed by the Sharia Council of Aleppo.

They continue until today to demand his release. At the end of June 2013, in the same neighbourhood, the activists shouted, "go f*c* yourself Islamic council," protesting at the repressive and authoritarian politics of the latter. Popular outrage was also expressed following the assassination by foreign jihadists belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group (ISIS) of a 14-year old boy, who allegedly made a blasphemous comment in a joke referring to Prophet Mohammad.

A protest was organized by the popular committee of Bustan Qasr against the Islamic council and the Islamist groups. Activists cried, "what a shame, what a shame, the revolutionaries have become shabiha," comparing the Islamic council to the Syrian regime's secret police, a clear allusion to their

authoritarian practices.

There are weekly protests on Fridays. During the one on Friday 2 August 2013, the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), who play an important informative role for the revolution, but also a role of support by supplying foods, goods and services to the populations and the refugees, declared this in a release: "in a unified message from the revolution to the entire world, we are confirming that the kidnapping of activists and essential actors of the revolution, unless they serve tyranny, hinder the freedom and the dignity of the revolution." This message was addressed directly to those reactionary Islamist groups. In the same vein, on 28 July 2013, the LCCs wrote a release with the title "the tyranny is one, whether in the name of religion or of secularism," rejecting both the Islamists and the regime.

The Council of Salah Eldeen Quarter, in Aleppo, signed a placard on September 27 2013, saying in opposition to ISIS: "Take Your Islam and Leave Us Our Islam - Islam conquered hearts before lands".

Coordination committees such as the Kurdish Fraternity Committee have accused ISIS of "occupying cities and terrorizing citizens", equating them with the pro-regime group Hezbollah, which has been ruthlessly targeting civilians. They demonstrated in Ashrafiya, Aleppo, on September 20, 2013 against ISIS and we could see banners notably saying, "Syria will be free, free; ISIS, get out" and "We Syrians Reject Masked Fighters in Our Country," "ISIS is the Regime's State of Iraq and Syria", and "Our Syria is colourful. No to ISIS and its black flag."

In earlier September, eleven civilian groups representing the organized structures of the revolution in a broad area outside Damascus, rallied strongly around Razan Zaitouneh, a key grassroots revolutionary figure. The 36-year-old lawyer was threatened and harassed by members of armed jihadist factions in eastern Ghouta of Damascus, for no other reason than, "being an independent and unveiled woman who is among the grassroots leadership cadres of our revolution," as one activist put it.

More recent examples can be also be cited, such as the Statement of the Civilian Movement in Syria Regarding the Remarks of Mr. Zahran Alloush, Commander of the Army of Islam on October 14, 2013 in which groups and members of the Syrian revolutionary process stated their rejection « of any attempt by any party to impose authoritarianism upon decision-making and upon the work of citizens. We also reject any attempt to make compliance with any institution not elected by the people, no matter how powerful or wealthy the institution, a benchmark for the public good or a gauge of patriotism or an indicator of the ability to perform civic duty today ».

This statement was issued after Mr. Zahran Alloush (Commander of the Army of Islam) pronounced the establishment of the expanded Douma Civilian Council « divisive » because it ought to have taken the Consultative Council that is associated with him as its sole reference point.

In the eyes of the people, ISIS is yet another face of the Assad regime because of its authoritarianism, as expressed on a banner in a demonstration on December 27 2013 in Maraat al-Numan in Idlib that said, "The majority of us have become wanted by two states (the Assad regime and ISIS)".

On January 3, 2014, demonstrations occurred in different locations where ISIS was present to demand its departure and overthrow. Chants such as, "Assad and ISIS are one" or "ISIS get out", widely used for a while now in liberated areas of Syria, were heard everywhere.

The Syrian revolutionary masses have proven for a while that their revolution is not dead and never

has been. But the world does not want to see this symbol. They ignore the fact that, in a neighbourhood of Aleppo as late as Saturday, January 4, 2014, slogans are still being used against the Assad regime and against the jihadists – slogans such as, “our revolution is against all oppressors ” or “the Syrian people will never submit”.

Part 4

The fronts of the revolution are many and overlapping, from patriarchy to Arab chauvinism. Despite harsh conditions, mass participation in the revolutionary process is still ongoing.

‘Enemies are many. The revolution is one and continues

Arabs and Kurds are united

In the northeastern part of Syria, populated by a majority of Kurds, recent battles between Islamists and Kurdish militias from the PYD (linked to the PKK) has led to the emergence of many popular initiatives from the activists and the local population.

Those popular initiatives aimed to show the brotherhood of Kurds and Arabs in this region, and to reaffirm that the popular Syrian revolution is for all, and that it condemns racism and sectarianism.

During those battles in the Raqqah province, the city of Tell Abyad has seen the creation of the “Chirko Ayoubi” brigade, which joined the Kurdish Front brigade on July 22, 2013. This brigade now combines Arabs and Kurds together. They have published a common declaration denouncing the violations committed by Islamist groups and the attempts at dividing the Syrian people in its ethnic and sectarian basis. Unfortunately some other FSA forces have fought on the side of the Islamists.

In the city of Aleppo, in the Achrafieh neighbourhood – mostly populated by Kurds – a protest was organized on August 1, 2013, gathering many hundreds of people who support brotherhood between Arabs and Kurds, and condemn the acts committed by Islamist extremist groups against the Kurdish population, chanting together for the unity of the Syrian people.

In the city of Tell Abyad, which has suffered from heavy fighting, activists have tried to organize many initiatives aimed at ending armed fighting between the two groups, and stopping the forced expulsion of civilians. They want to put in place a people’s committee to govern and manage the city and to promote collaborative initiatives and actions between Arab and Kurdish populations, to reach a consensus through pacific means. The efforts are ongoing despite the continuous battle between Islamist and Kurdish militias.

In the city of Amouda, around thirty activists met on August 5, 2013 with Kurdish and Syrian revolutionary flags behind a poster saying “I love you Homs,” to show their solidarity with this city, besieged by the Syrian regime’s army.

Recently again, in the city of Quamishli – where Arab populations (Muslim and Christian), Kurds and Assyrians live – local activists have organized numerous projects to ensure coexistence and the administration of certain neighbourhoods by joint committees. In the same city, the branch of the Free Kurdish Student Union has started a small internet campaign calling for freedom, peace and brotherhood, tolerance and equality for the future of Syria.

Women and patriarchal values

One of the active women in the group in Salamiah said: “We participated in the funeral processions of our martyrs, although generally the entrance of women in cemeteries is not a customary practice in our city. But we wanted to break archaic customs, including this one. Each of us considered the martyr as a son, brother or father. Any martyr is the son of the city and not just of his family”.

She added: « What distinguishes this group of rebel women is the team spirit with which they work to achieve their objective, which is also the objective of the revolution throughout Syria ; that is to overthrow the dictatorial regime based on cliques and clans and the establishment of a civilian democratic state for all the Syrian people, with all its components. “

While Ahlam, another female revolutionary, says: “We categorically reject all phenomena foreign to our society and want to see removed both foreign agendas and agendas far distant from the aspirations of the Syrian people, acting under different names and in an extremist form that only serves the regime, giving the latter arguments to hit out at the revolution and to terrorize the population.” She continues: “As a group of women, we believe that the establishment of a free and modern state cannot be achieved without the existence of citizenship. It is our responsibility today to prepare a new phase in the life of Syrian women, so that a woman can expect to enjoy the full rights of citizenship in a new society. Our revolution is not only a revolution against a corrupt regime and archaic and obsolete laws that do not guarantee justice to women. It is also a revolution against all the customs and the lores that have held women back, preventing them from full and effective participation in the construction of the state and society.

Popular resistance from below

Thus, the popular committees and the organizations play a crucial role in the pursuit of the revolutionary process, because these people are essential actors who enable the people’s movement to resist. It is not about diminishing the role played by the armed resistance; but the latter depend on the popular movements to continue its fight. Without this, we would not stand a chance.

A banner crafted by the revolutionary city of Kafranbel sums up very well the spirit of the Syrian revolution, “enemies are many ... the revolution is one... and continues”. Yes the revolution continues, despite the difficulties and multiple dangers. The Syrian people continues its path towards freedom and dignity, sweeping away all its oppressors.

We have for example seen the youth in the city of Deir Attyah self-organizing to clean their streets in a campaign called “cleaning Deir Attyah to bring it back more beautiful”, and the youth of Daraya launching a campaign a few weeks ago to ask for the end of the siege in their area.

Popular activism in the Syrian revolutionary process is still, as we have shown here, very much alive.

Joseph Daher

P.S.

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