

# 2011-2015 - What Happened to the Arab Spring?

Friday 25 December 2015, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [MATTA Nada](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2015).

**It's been five years since the start of the Tunisian uprising. What was won — and what remains — in the Arab Spring?**

Today marks the fifth anniversary of the start of the Arab uprising. Sparked in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, a wave of revolutionary contagion spread across the Arab world. Millions of people took to the streets demanding dignity, democracy, and social justice. Mass mobilizations on an unprecedented scale in recent history took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, and transformed social and political dynamics across the whole region. A politics of hope became possible.

Five years into the uprisings, however, counterrevolutionary forces composed of the old regimes and Islamic fundamentalist forces have regained the political initiative, and are now violently vying for control. Egypt is under a [worse dictatorship](#) than before its uprising, and civil wars have broken out in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Hundreds of thousands have died, and many millions have been displaced.

How to take stock of this conjuncture? What are its main features and possibilities? Nada Matta for *Jacobin* sought the answers to these questions with Gilbert Achcar, one of the world's leading analysts of the Arab region.

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**Nada Matta - When the Arab uprising started, you pointed out from the beginning that it will be a long process of struggle that would include periods of success and retreats. Five years into the revolts, what is your general evaluation?**

**Gilbert Achcar** - To clarify the terms of the discussion, the dominant view in the beginning, especially in Western media, was that the Arab region was entering a period of democratic transitions, which would take weeks or months in each country and remain relatively peaceful, ushering into a new regional era of electoral democracy.

According to this view, the transition had been basically achieved in Tunisia with the fall of Ben Ali, and in Egypt with the fall of Mubarak. It was believed that the same pattern would spread to most countries of the region through a domino effect, similar to what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989-91. This vision was encapsulated in the label “Arab Spring” which spread very quickly.

It was predicated on the view that this “Spring” was the result of a cultural and political mutation born by a new generation [connected to global culture](#), thanks to the new information and communication technologies. According to this view, the uprisings were essentially, if not

exclusively, a struggle for political freedom and democracy.

This vision was not completely off the mark, of course. These dimensions were definitely a salient feature of the uprising. However, the key point that I emphasized from the beginning was that the deep roots of the regional upheaval are social and economic, before being political. What happened was a *social* explosion in the first place, even if it took on a political character like any large-scale social explosion.

Its social background could be told from the fact that it first occurred in the two countries that had witnessed the most outstanding accumulation of social struggles, class struggle, during the preceding years: Tunisia and Egypt. The uprising's slogans themselves were not only political, they were not merely about democracy and freedom, but also and very much so about social demands.

From this angle, the regional uprising could be analyzed through Marxist lenses as a classic case of social revolution resulting from the protracted blockage of development that has characterized the Arab-speaking region for three decades, with record low rates of growth producing record high rates of unemployment, especially among the youth.

I was particularly prepared to see things from that angle as I had been teaching a course on "Problems of Development in the Middle East and North Africa" for several years before the uprising. It was clear to me that the developmental blockage of the region would sooner or later lead to a major social explosion.

That's why I described early on what started in Tunisia on December 17, 2010 and then spread to the rest of the region as the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process. By this, I am referring to historical processes of revolution which unfold not over weeks and months, but over years and decades. The uprisings were opening a long-term period of regional instability that would necessarily go through ups and downs, revolutionary upsurges and counterrevolutionary setbacks, and would also involve a lot of violence.

At the beginning, I sounded pessimistic because I was telling people to cool down from the euphoria that gripped them, stressing that this was far from being the end of the story, that what is at stake is extremely complex and difficult, that it would take a long time, and that it would not remain peaceful. I also emphasized from the very beginning that the Tunisian and Egyptian scenarios of relatively peaceful overthrow of the rulers could not be repeated in countries like Libya and Syria, or the monarchies for that matter: I said this before the uprising started in any of these countries.

Nowadays, I may sound optimistic in asserting that the revolutionary process is far from over and inviting people to cheer up away from the dominant gloom that is gripping them. The situation looks disastrous and catastrophic in several countries: above all, of course, in Syria where a huge tragedy is going on, but also in Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. This is, however, not the end. There will be no stability in the region, in the long term, unless radical social and political change occurs.

To be sure, there is no inevitability for such change to occur. My attitude is not one of optimism, but one of apprehending the dynamics of the crisis in historical perspective, and stressing that there is still hope. The only safe prediction one can make is that, short of the emergence of the subjective political conditions for social and political change, i.e. organized political forces bearing the banner of progressive change, the region is doomed to see more disasters such as those we have seen unfold over the last two years in particular.

**Could you describe the economic and social causes that stand behind the uprisings? What is this protracted development blockage that led to the uprising?**

This is analyzed in detail in the first two chapters of my book, [\*The People Want\*](#). To put it a nutshell, if you look at the rates of economic growth in the Arab-speaking region compared to all other parts of Africa and Asia, you cannot fail to note that they have been quite low. The rates of GDP growth, especially GDP per capita growth, have been very low.

This means that the economies have been unable to create jobs matching the demographic growth, thus producing [massive unemployment](#), especially young and female unemployment. The Arab-speaking region has held the highest rates of unemployment in the world over recent decades.

This protracted economic blockage has produced explosive social consequences: not only massive unemployment, but also a host of social issues including huge local and regional inequalities. The coexistence of extremely ostentatious wealth and extreme poverty creates huge frustration. This problem worsened considerably since the oil boom of the 1970s. As I keep saying, the real question in 2011 was not so much why the explosion did occur, but why it did take so long to occur given the over-accumulation of explosive potential.

Now, the reason for this economic blockage is to be found in the workings of neoliberalism in the Arab context. Like most countries of the world, the Arab states started embracing the neoliberal paradigm in the 1970s. This led to a gradual retrenchment of the state from the economy. According to the neoliberal creed, the declining role of public investment was to be compensated by the private sector to which many incentives were offered.

This model of private-led growth did work in some countries with appropriate conditions, such as Chile or Turkey or India, albeit with a [high social cost](#). In the Arab region, however, it could simply not work — due to the character of the state.

The vast majority of Arab states combine two features: they are rentier states, i.e. countries in which rents (from natural resources or strategic functions) constitute a sizeable part of the state income, and states that are all located on a scale going from “patrimonial” to “neopatrimonial,” the major peculiarity being the existence of a core of plainly *patrimonial* states, i.e. states which are “owned” by the ruling group for all intents and purposes, unlike the “modern state” where the ruling personnel are only civil servants. These features led to what I called “dominant political determination of the orientation of economic activity.”

If you add to that the general political conditions of high instability and conflict in the region, you understand that there was no way that the private sector would become the engine of some economic miracle as the neoliberals wanted to believe. Private investment remained quite limited, speculative in large part, and oriented toward quick profit. The decline and stagnation of public investment were not compensated for by the private sector. The neoliberal model failed miserably in the Arab region.

All this points to the fact that the upheaval was the result of a structural crisis, not of an episodic or cyclical one. And it was not a process of democratization coming on top of a long period of development, as happened in some “emergent” countries, but the result of a protracted blockage. The logical conclusion therefore is that the region’s countries need a radical change of their sociopolitical structure in order to overcome the blockage.

Removing the tip of the iceberg, such as removing Ben Ali or Mubarak and their entourage, could not end the turmoil. Hence my emphasis from the beginning on the long term, and on the notion of “revolutionary process” as distinct from “revolution” tout court believed to have ended with the downfall of the autocrat.

**How did economic hardship and developmental challenges translate into large-scale movements for change such as the uprisings? Is it the level of hardship, such as unemployment, that made the difference? A counter-argument would be that economic hardship and developmental challenges existed in the Arab world and other countries for long periods, but did not lead to revolts.**

It's not really a counter-argument because we're describing a blockage that worsened over three decades. This leads to cumulative effects. One of them is the increase in the [mass of unemployed](#). The unemployment rate has not been steady over this period. It has increased and acquired a very high level after a number of years. At some point the cumulative social effect of an economic blockage tends to provoke an explosion in hermetically closed regimes. That's on the one hand.

On the other hand, there are also a number of political factors that intervened in determining the explosion. I borrowed from Althusser the concept of [overdetermination](#) applied to historical events. The explosion was overdetermined in the sense that, in addition to the structural social and economic factors, a number of political factors intervened.

One of them, for instance, is the destabilizing effect of imperialist wars in the region, and especially the occupation of Iraq. These diverse factors concurred to produce the big upheaval.

But not all of them have the same weight: the social and economic factors are the most important, but the combination of all was particularly explosive.

**Which social groups played a role in organizing these uprisings? Did the organizers come from a specific class background and why? Were there differences across Arab countries?**

There were differences, of course, but there are some common features in that regard. Let me start with the latter. The media portrayed the movement as led by internet-savvy young people who formed networks through social media. The uprisings were even called "Facebook revolutions."

Again, this is not entirely wrong, but it is just one part of the truth. Among the organizers of the uprisings, there were indeed [young people](#) connected through social media networks. They played a key role in organizing demonstrations and rallies from one end of the Arab-speaking world to the other, from Morocco to Syria.

There were, however, other forces to which the media paid much less attention. They emerge necessarily if you ask: why did the uprising achieve a first victory in Tunisia, and why was Egypt the next country, why did these two countries show the way? If you investigate the matter properly, you cannot fail to notice that one common feature of the two countries is the importance of the workers' movement.

Tunisia has the only powerful organized workers' movement in the region with a certain degree of autonomy towards the government, allowing for real class-struggle membership at rank-and-file and intermediary-organizer levels.

[The UGTT](#) (the French acronym of the Tunisian General Labor Union) is a remarkable organization that played a key role in the social and political history of Tunisia. Among its intermediary organizers, there are a lot of people who belong to the Left. The UGTT was the real organizer of the uprising in Tunisia once it started unfolding. Without it, the movement would never have achieved the victory that it won in such a short period of less than one month.

Under the pressure of some of its branches, such as the school teachers' union, the UGTT got involved in organizing the movement, and provided it with a strong impetus. Its local branches

played a key role early on in the regions where the uprising started spreading, and they then pushed the UGTT leadership to join the fray.

The UGTT started organizing roaming general strikes, in one region after the other. The day that Ben Ali fled Tunisia, January 14, 2011, is actually the day when the general strike reached the capital. So, the UGTT was, in fact, the real organizer of the uprising in Tunisia.

In Egypt, there is alas no equivalent of the UGTT: the organized workers' movement is under government control, except for a few independent unions that were still new and small when the uprising began. The movement was led instead by a cartel of political forces.

Facebook activists played a role, to be sure, but to reduce the Egyptian uprising to [Wael Ghonim](#), the head of marketing of Google's regional branch who created a famous Facebook page and who wasn't even based in Egypt, but in Dubai, and portray him as the key figure of the uprising, as the world media did for a while, is quite ridiculous indeed.

It is not only a virtual network that called for the mass protest on January 25, but a cartel of seventeen real political forces. Real political networks active on the ground were involved. In preparing the ground for the uprising, and that's a decisive point, the workers' movement was crucial. The explosion in Egypt came on top of five years of an impressively high tide in workers' struggle, the most important in the country's history.

This tide peaked in 2007-08 but it remained at a high level until 2011. During the uprising itself, in early February, the working class entered into action: hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike as soon as the government called for a resumption of work. This wave of strikes was instrumental in precipitating Mubarak's downfall.

These are the real forces that played a key role in Egypt and Tunisia. In Bahrain as well workers played a key role, and this was completely overlooked. There, like in Tunisia, you had an independent organized workers' movement, albeit less powerful than the Tunisian one, which played a crucial role in the initial phase of the uprising in organizing a general strike.

The Bahraini workers' movement was harshly repressed, however, not only politically, but also by [mass dismissals](#) of workers. Even in Yemen, the uprising was preceded by a wave of workers' strikes.

In countries like Syria or Libya, on the other hand, due to extremely dictatorial governments, there was no preexisting autonomous organized groups, whether political or even social. Most of the political opposition had gone into exile after suffering terrible repression at home — and there were a number of killings of dissidents even abroad. Whatever anti-regime people remained in Syria were under very tight surveillance and could not engage in any large activity.

That's why in such countries, internet networks played a crucial role. In Syria, during its initial phase which lasted a few months, the uprising was organized by coordination committees (tansiqiyyat) mostly composed of young people using internet networks.

Thus, depending on the social and the political conditions of each country, different social and political factors were involved in the organization of the uprising.

**Let's take a closer look at Egypt and Tunisia, and we'll then come back to Syria. While one can reject the explanation of the uprising as the result of splits among dominant elites in Arab countries, there were in Egypt growing tensions between new emerging neoliberal elites and what it is usually referred to as the old pro-Mubarak guard and military elites.**

**How do you evaluate these tensions? Do you think they had an impact on the revolts and do you think they are indicative of a general trend in the Arab world as a result of the growing political role of private capital?**

Such features have been overblown with a lot of wishful thinking based on the mantra in political science according to which the middle class is the crucial agent of democratic change. Therefore, at the beginning, we heard a lot the idea that the uprising was led by a Westernized middle class. In fact, the neoliberal bourgeoisie in its vast majority was very afraid of the dynamics of the uprising.

If in countries like Tunisia or Egypt, some of them ended up taking their distance from the ruler, it is only because the ruler had become a liability. But they did so fundamentally in order to preserve the state. And if some members of the neoliberal capitalist class, like [Naguib Sawiris](#) in Egypt for instance, projected themselves opportunistically as liberals, the bulk of the economic elite did not support the uprising.

However, in both Tunisia and Egypt, the army and a large chunk of the state apparatus ended up being convinced that they had to get rid of the president in order to prevent the uprising from carrying on and radicalizing. People forget that February 11, 2011 in Egypt was as much a military coup as the July 3, 2013 was. Both coups were executed by the [Supreme Council of the Armed Forces \(SCAF\)](#), led by [Mohammed Tantawi](#) the first time and by [now-President Sisi](#) the second. And both coups hijacked a gigantic mass mobilization.

**Some people argue that there was discomfort among the military elites in Egypt with Mubarak's son, Gamal, and the growing power of economic elites around him. Would you say that this had any effect on the uprising?**

There were certainly tensions in Egypt between the army, on one hand, and [Gamal Mubarak](#) and his cronies, on the other. They were actually competitors, because the army in Egypt is also an economic institution. It is actually and by far the most important single group of economic interests in the country.

The armed forces are involved in all sorts of economic activities unrelated to military affairs. They act as a major holding, competing with some private entrepreneurs and subcontracting to others — while claiming a right of preemption on all contracts.

The tensions between the military and Gamal Mubarak were exacerbated when Hosni Mubarak expressed his intention to hand power to his son. The military, of course, were fully against this. All the more since it would have gone against the long-established tradition of the Egyptian republic of being ruled by military men. After Nasser, both Sadat and Mubarak were like him issued from the military.

But all these tensions were not central to the uprising in any manner. They were the background for the changes that occurred at the top, but the uprising came from the bottom of society and was definitely not the result of a struggle within the elite.

**More recently, the labor movement has been a major player in the negotiations over the future of Tunisia. One can also argue that in Egypt the increase in labor struggles in 2012 partly explain the coup in 2013. Sisi did not only want to crush the Muslim Brotherhood. He also wanted to end the ongoing radicalization and increasing levels of social unrest that peaked in early 2013 against Morsi (the president at the time). How and why did labor in Egypt and Tunisia play different roles?**



First of all, as I mentioned earlier, there is unfortunately no equivalent in Egypt of the Tunisian UGTT, because since Nasser's time and until 2011 the workers' movement had been brought under full state control. Although we saw the emergence of a burgeoning independent workers' movement very few years before the uprising in Egypt, it never achieved anything remotely comparable to the Tunisian movement.

True, the working class played a major role in both countries, but in one country it is the organized working class whereas in the other the class as a whole was and remains unorganized: what you have are mostly wildcat strikes organized at local levels. Most prominent were the 24,000 textile workers of [El-Mahalla El-Kubra](#) in Egypt who have been the vanguard of class struggle in Egypt before the uprising and until now. At every crucial moment they have been on the front line.

But the absence of a class-independent country-wide organized workers' movement in Egypt has huge implications. The existence of the UGTT is the major factor that allowed the events to take a different route in Tunisia — in addition to the absence of a tradition of military rule: Tunisia was a police state under Ben Ali but not a military dictatorship.

So these two factors combined — the relative exteriority of the army to politics and the importance of the organized workers' movement — explain why the workers' movement could play such a central role in the Tunisian events.

However, it is not a revolutionary workers' movement. The Left has become hegemonic within it since 2011, but its vast majority is not radical. The UGTT leads the basic economic struggle but it doesn't aim at changing the class nature of power.

That's why it [seeks compromises](#) with the bosses and with the state, and played the role of conciliator between the two counterrevolutionary factions in the country — the old regime and the Islamic movement — instead of fighting against them both for radical social change. The fact that it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with the bosses' union is quite telling in that regard.

From the Western mainstream [Orientalist](#) perspective, however, the Tunisian "democratic exception" is understood as "cultural." Were those who uphold this view not ashamed of saying it, they would have attributed the "democratic exception" to Ben Ali himself!

However, the true and only Tunisian exception is the UGTT, this powerful independent organized workers' movement. This fact confirms that the most crucial factor for democracy is not "the middle class" as bourgeois political science puts it, but the workers' movement.

And the most accurate criterion for political democracy is actually the respect of labor rights and the existence of an independent workers' movement. You can find several countries with a thriving "middle class" under dictatorship, but you'll find nowhere an autonomous workers movement under conditions of dictatorship.

**The counterrevolution nearly won in all Arab countries, except Tunisia we could say. Although the Tunisians have not achieved their quest for democracy and social justice, at least there's still a potential for challenging the centers of power.**

Tunisia is no exception to the regional counterrevolutionary trend, I'm afraid. It is also experiencing a phase of counterrevolution, albeit a much milder one. Tunisia is witnessing a massive comeback of the old regime men.

The current [Tunisian president](#) himself — aside from being the oldest head of state on earth after Zimbabwe's Mugabe and the Queen of England, with the paradox of being supposedly the outcome

of a “youth revolution” — is very much a member of the old regime. The new dominant party in Tunisia is to a large extent — not exclusively but to a very large extent — a refurbished version of the old regime’s ruling party.

But unlike in Egypt, this is all taking place in a smoother and more peaceful way. Crucially here stands the fact that Tunisia is now ruled by a coalition between this renewed version of the old regime and [El-Nahda](#), the Tunisian equivalent of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, although it did not have the same strength.

It’s a different scenario in which both wings of the counterrevolution are in coalition instead of fighting each other, and that’s indeed the scenario that the United States wishes to see extended to the whole region: a coalition of refurbished old regimes and the so-called moderate opposition represented by the Muslim Brotherhood’s branches at the regional level.

**Let’s move to Syria. Why did so many in the global left get confused over Syria? The Syrian regime is extremely oppressive and sectarian, and yet the Syrian revolution has not received the support that others had.**

I think that it is primarily based on misconceptions in reaction to the US government. Those who don’t know the history of the region think that because the Syrian regime is allied to Iran and to the Lebanese Hezbollah, it is anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist.

The Syrian regime’s propaganda represented it in this manner as well. In late January 2011, in a [famous interview](#) that Bashar El-Assad gave to the *Wall Street Journal* before the beginning of the uprising in Syria, he explained that his country is immune to the regional wind — as he wanted to believe — because his regime is “very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.” He added that “people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas.” By that he meant that by letting the “very ideological” Syrian people believe that he is anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist, he had achieved popular satisfaction with his regime.

Thus, when Hosni Mubarak got removed by the Egyptian military, the Syrian state television displayed the news under the heading: “The Fall of the Camp David Regime.” They wanted to believe, or rather make believe, that the Egyptian uprising was a result of the 1978 peace deal with Israel, whereas the purportedly nationalist Syrian regime was immune to popular revolt. That was pure wishful thinking, of course, as the events proved a few weeks later.

Now, the fact that anyone on the Left would fall prey to such propaganda and believe it, is very much deplorable. If the Syrian regime did not conclude a peace treaty with Israel, the truth is that it was not for lack of want on the Syrian side, but for lack of want on the Israeli side. There have been actually several [rounds of negotiations](#) between the two states. Before 2011, the Turkish then-Prime Minister Erdogan was mediating between his then-good friend Bashar El-Assad and Israel.

What made a peace deal between Israel and Syria more difficult to conclude than between Egypt and Israel is rooted in geography. Israel gave the Sinai back to Egypt because militarily it is a bulwark in itself, especially since one condition of the deal was that it would remain demilitarized. During the time it would take the Egyptian army to cross the desert stretching between the Suez Canal and the Israeli border, it could be destroyed several times by Israel’s air force.

In contrast, the [Golan Heights](#) are a strategic position directly overlooking Israel’s pre-1967 territory. This is why Israel officially annexed the Golan in 1981. Aside from East Jerusalem, it is the only part of the Arab territories occupied in 1967 that has been officially annexed by the Israeli state.



The Assad regime [entered Lebanon](#) in 1976 with an Israeli and US green light in order to crush the PLO and the Lebanese left, and save the Lebanese far right from an impending defeat. After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Assad regime continued what Israel had started by expelling the Palestinian fighters from the southern half of the country up to and including Beirut.

The next year, through its proxies, the Assad regime expelled the PLO fighters and Arafat himself from Northern Lebanon. Damascus supported its Lebanese allies of the Shia sectarian movement, Amal, in their war against the Palestinian camps in the rest of the 1980s. And in 1990, Hafez El-Assad joined the US-led coalition in the onslaught on Iraq, involving Syrian troops in the battle. People forget or ignore all this.

There is strictly nothing anti-imperialist about the Assad regime. It is a purely opportunistic mafia-like regime pursuing its own interest. At the same time, it is one of the most despotic regimes in the region, practicing extremely brutal repression.

In the early 1980s a major crackdown on the Left occurred: close to one thousand members of the underground Communist Action Party were thrown in jail and were submitted to terrible torture. Hundreds of them remained in jail for periods ranging from ten to twenty years, although they were never involved in any violence and never advocated violence.

The Syrian regime has been implementing thorough neoliberal changes over the last fifteen years with very visible results. Syria has seen the development of a most corrupt crony capitalist class, and the ruling clan has shifted from holding military and political power into becoming the key holder of economic power. [Bashar El-Assad's cousin](#) is by far the wealthiest man in Syria. And several of his other relatives have become very wealthy.

On the other end of the social spectrum, Syria has witnessed surging unemployment, de-industrialization, and impoverishment of the countryside. All this led to huge social tensions, which exploded in 2011. In that regard, Syria followed the same pattern as the rest of the region.

### **How do those who went out against Bashar El-Assad in 2011 differ, if at all, from their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts?**

In order to justify their support for the Assad regime, some people argue that the Syrian uprising, unlike other Arab countries, was led by reactionary Islamic forces. This again is completely untrue. First of all, in both Tunisia and Egypt, those who managed to take best advantage of the uprising were Islamic fundamentalist forces. Both the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) in Egypt and El-Nahda in Tunisia won the first elections in their countries.

So, if the argument is that the Syrian uprising has come under the domination of Islamic forces, then those who resort to such argument should have supported the old regime in both Tunisia and Egypt in order to be consistent.

Actually, part of the Left in Tunisia and Egypt now supports the old regime for a similar argument. In Egypt, most of the Left supported the coup led by Sisi, even though some of them may have regretted it later on. The basic fact is that there have been popular uprisings across the region.

If Islamic fundamentalist forces managed to become dominant among the organized forces in those uprisings, with no exception, it is surely due, on the one hand, to the practical and/or political weakness of the Left, but, on the other hand, it is also and above all a product of decades of rule by the despotic regimes. No one should miss that. The Syrian regime was not a shield against Islamic fundamentalism, nor were Mubarak or Ben Ali, and nor are Assad and Sisi today.

Ever since Bashar El-Assad came to power succeeding his father in dynastic fashion, he encouraged Salafism in Syria. People who are familiar with Syria could notice the proliferation of niqabs (face veils) in Syrian streets. This was encouraged by the young Assad, believing that it would buy his regime social peace, and that this reactionary Salafist Islamic ideology would keep people away from political involvement. It eventually blew back in his face.

The story is similar at the entire regional level. The United States itself favored Islamic fundamentalism against Arab nationalism and the Left since the 1950s, until it ended blowing back in its face. In order to defeat Nasserism, Sadat released the Muslim Brotherhood from jail and let them organize. They were tolerated as a mass party under Mubarak, albeit under tight surveillance. By crushing the Left with the help of Islamic fundamentalist forces, the United States and the local regimes produced the conditions for the rise of opposition from among these forces.

Add to this that when the Syrian uprising started, the Assad regime did everything it could to prevent its democratic, secular, non-sectarian potential from developing. This was indeed the major threat in the regime's eyes. It crushed the movement most brutally, imprisoning tens of thousands of mostly young people who had been the uprising's organizing force and spearhead.

At the very same time, as has been documented in many articles and books, the regime released from its jails the jihadists that it had been detaining after having used them in Iraq. This release of those jihadists was a purely Machiavellian trick by the regime, in order to accomplish the self-fulfilling prophecy that it propagated from day one in claiming that the uprising was but a jihadist conspiracy. The regime did everything to [create the conditions](#) for Islamic fundamentalism to grow in Syria so as to alter the character of the uprising.

At the same time, it relied increasingly for its defense on Iran's regional proxies from Lebanon and Iraq, which are certainly no less Islamic fundamentalist than the majority of Syrian Islamic anti-Assad forces. Those who claim that the Syrian regime is "secular" completely overlook this obvious fact which flies in the face of their assertion.

Al-Qaeda emerged as the Al-Nusra Front in Syria in early 2012, with a heavy involvement of the Iraqi branch, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), in which former members of Iraq's Baath Party, the brother enemy of Syria's ruling Baath Party, play a crucial role.

When they decided to merge Al-Nusra with the ISI under the name of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (al-Sham, i.e. Greater Syria), known as ISIS or ISIL (L for Levant), the Iraqis provoked a split with part of the Syrians who carried on as Al-Nusra, as well as with the global Al-Qaeda. For Assad and his cronies, this was a very favorable development. ISIS clashed much more with the opposition to their regime than with their troops.

The truth is that ISIS is the Assad regime's "preferred enemy," because they are so repulsive for the West that they are the regime's best argument in trying to seduce Western powers into changing their attitude toward it. You can see now very clearly how the Syrian regime is trying its best, with Russia's help, to seduce the West into supporting it in the name of the fight against ISIS.

An increasing number of members of Western power elites — especially among the most reactionary à la Donald Trump, [Marine Le Pen](#) and the like — are advocating precisely this. They call for an alliance with Assad and Putin.

**If we look at Syria today, critics argue that all forces on the ground in Syria are counterrevolutionary. Is this correct? Aren't the fighters on the ground in their vast majority Syrians who are fighting the dictatorship?**

They are indeed. But one of the complexities of the situation in the region is that you don't have a classical binary of revolution and counterrevolution. You have a triangle of forces. On the one hand, a revolutionary pole consisting of a bloc of social and political forces representing the aspirations of the workers, young people, and women who rose up against the old regime, aspiring to a different progressive society.

On the other side, however, you find not one but two counterrevolutionary camps. One is the old regimes' camp, the classical counterrevolution. And then for the historical reasons that I already mentioned, there are reactionary forces of a religious character, which were initially fostered by the old regimes as a counterweight to the Left but developed and turned against these regimes. Both are counterrevolutionary forces in the sense that their fundamental interests and programs clash directly with the aspirations of the revolutionary pole that struggles for social, economic, and democratic change.

When they came to power in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and El-Nahda in Tunisia embodied another version of the counterrevolution, one that Washington believed would work better than the old regime. They continued the old regime's social and economic policies.

The only change they tried to implement was about Islamizing the institutions — or rather further Islamization of the institutions in Egypt, where you had already quite a deal of it under Sadat and Mubarak. Tensions arose between them and the old regime when they tried to assert their control over the state apparatuses. That's the background of the 2013 coup in Egypt.

So you have all over the region two rival counterrevolutionary camps and one revolutionary pole. The latter's practical and/or political weakness allowed the situation to develop into a clash between the two counterrevolutionary camps, while it got marginalized.

Syria is the most extreme case in point. There was a huge progressive potential in the uprising in 2011, as much if not more than in other countries because of the larger diffusion of progressive and left ideas among the Syrian population — quite more than in Egypt, but less than in Tunisia. This potential did not materialize in an organized form, however. Virtual internet networks are great at organizing demonstrations and rallies, but they are no substitute to a real organizational network.

Add to this the very active involvement of the regional counterrevolutionary stronghold represented by the [Gulf oil monarchies](#), which did their best to strengthen the Islamic fundamentalist component of the Syrian opposition at the expense of anything else. Because, a real democratic uprising is the major threat to them like it is for Assad. In a sense, they concurred with the Assad regime in promoting the Islamic fundamentalist component of the opposition at the detriment of the secular democratic.

The end result in Syria is indeed that the situation is dominated by a clash between two counterrevolutionary forces: on one side, the regime and its allies and, on the other side, an armed opposition in which the dominant forces uphold political perspectives that are deeply contradictory with the initial progressive aspirations of the uprising as expressed in 2011. True, there are also armed opposition forces which are less reactionary, albeit hardly progressive.

More important than that is the fact that a major part of those who joined the Islamic fundamentalist armed groups did not do so for ideological reasons, but because that's where they could get salaries on a backdrop of rapidly deteriorating living conditions due to the war. This is a key factor even in ISIS's development, one that allowed it to recruit so many thousands of fighters.

This said, the potential that exploded in 2011 has not been crushed but was rather marginalized

politically. Many of those who represented this potential have left the country into exile because they are radically opposed to the regime and threatened by it, on the one hand, and they see the proliferation of reactionary forces who are equally dangerous for them, on the other.

Most of those who survived and did not end up in jail have left the country. These thousands of activists who embodied the democratic, progressive potential of the 2011 uprising and are now in exile are a reason to keep hope in the future.

For the moment, however, the best one can hope for is the cessation of this terrible dynamics of “clash of barbarisms,” as I called it in the aftermath of 9/11, with the barbaric Assad regime on one end and the [barbaric ISIS](#) on the other end, the latter being originally a product of the chief barbarism of the US occupation of Iraq. The civil war, the destruction of Syria, and the massacre of its people by the regime should come to an end under conditions that allow the refugees to get back to their hometowns from exile or displacement within the country. This is the most urgent now.

At this moment, there are no prospects whatsoever for a progressive outcome. Anyone who believes otherwise is dreaming. In the absence of such prospects, the best that can happen is the end of the continuous deterioration brought by the war. For the war to end, you need some kind of compromise between the regime and the opposition. And for this to happen, Assad must go, because there can't be any workable compromise, any ending of the conflict, with Assad in place.

In supporting him, Russia and Iran are blocking the possibility for compromise. Since 2012, the Obama administration has been saying, “We are not advocating regime change in Syria but we believe Assad should step down for a compromise between the regime and the opposition to see the light.”

Obama advocated what he called [“the Yemeni solution.”](#) In Yemen, the president accepted to step down and hand power to the vice-president, and the regime was not changed. Instead, you had a coalition government of the opposition and the regime, the president's clan excepted. It did not last long as we know, but that was regarded by Obama in 2012 and is still seen by him as the model to follow in Syria.

Iran and Russia, however, fear that if the Assad clan goes, this could disrupt the whole regime which has become quite shaky, and they would stand to lose Syria as one of their key allied states in the region. They are therefore preventing the progress toward a negotiated compromise. Such a compromise, to be sure, would be far from ideal.

But unless the war stops, there will be no revival of the progressive democratic potential of the Syrian uprising as it emerged in 2011. The potential still exists: if the war stops and the social economic issues come to the fore again, people will see the vanity of both camps who have no solutions for the country's problems.

**Some say that if Assad were to leave power, ISIS and Al-Nusra would take over. You are saying that ousting Assad will quicken the struggle for liberalization.**

Indeed. The main reason that allows Al-Nusra and ISIS to develop is the continued existence of the Assad regime. It is the Assad regime's barbarism in repressing the uprising that created the ground for Al-Qaeda and ISIS to develop in Syria in the first place.

There were no ready masses waiting to join such crazy groups. People ended up finding in them an appropriate response to the atrocities committed by the regime as well as to the chaos that prevailed. ISIS played on that, imposing a religious totalitarian order while providing state-like social services. That is why it called itself the Islamic State.

The only possible way to get rid of ISIS and Al-Qaeda is by removing the causes that lead people to join these groups. When the United States tried to crush Al-Qaeda by sheer force during the battle and massacre of Fallujah in Iraq, it failed miserably. It is only when it changed strategy and empowered the Arab Sunni tribes through funds and arms that it managed to marginalize Al-Qaeda.

Al Qaeda-turned-ISIS managed later to recover control over large parts of Iraq in the summer of 2014, because the Iran-backed sectarian government of Nouri Al-Maliki recreated the conditions of Iraqi Arab Sunni resentment that allowed Al-Qaeda to develop under US occupation initially. This is why most of Iraq's Arab Sunnis paradoxically dreaded the US evacuation of Iraq in 2011. By an irony of history, they had come to see US troops as a protection against the Shia sectarian government of Maliki.

In Syria, the conditions for Arab Sunni sectarian resentment must be removed in order to end the sectarian appeal of Al-Nusra, ISIS, and other fundamentalists. The first condition for doing that is the removal of the Assad clan from power, as they are resented by a major part of the Syrian society.

### **Let's move to geopolitics and the US. How would you describe the American response to the uprisings?**

This is again something on which many people on the Left think by inertia. Many fail to grasp that the Iraq experience was a defining disaster. It is actually the most important disaster in US imperial history. From a strategic point of view, it is worse than Vietnam.

People fail to understand that, after Bush, the Obama administration was no longer in the business of regime change. The motto for Barack Obama in the face of the 2011 Arab uprising was "orderly transition," not "regime change." He wanted to preserve the regimes through limited changes at the top that would allow for a smooth transition without fundamental regime disruption.

That applies even to Libya. The US-led intervention in Libya was an attempt to co-opt the Libyan uprising and steer it into a transition that was negotiated with Gaddafi's son, the Western-cherished scion of the clan. They tried this until the very last minute, but it failed miserably because the insurrection in Tripoli led to the collapse of the regime.

That's why Libya turned into one more disaster from the US imperialist perspective and a further argument against any "regime change" that includes radical dismantlement of the state, as happened previously in Iraq. That's why the US government never said that it wishes to overthrow the regime in Syria. They only said that Bashar El-Assad must step down in order to allow for a negotiated transition.

They want the man to go, that is, with the regime remaining in place. The United States faced the 2011 Arab uprising when it was actually at the nadir of its regional hegemony since 1990. In that same year of 2011, it evacuated Iraq without achieving any of the key imperialist goals of the invasion.

The intervention in Libya also happened thanks to a Russian green light. Both China and Russia abstained at the UN Security Council. They could have vetoed the intervention, but they did not. However, unlike Gaddafi, the Syrian regime is regarded by Russia as a main ally, whereas Gaddafi had shifted during his last years, becoming a dear friend of Washington, London, Paris, and Italy's Berlusconi.

When it came to Syria, Washington never seriously contemplated a direct military intervention. At one point in 2013, Obama got entangled in his own "red line" on the issue of chemical weapons, and was much relieved by the compromise with Assad that Russia offered him. Overall, the situation is

far more complex than the simplistic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic that informs much of the knee-jerk “anti-imperialist” left.

**If both Russia and the United States agree on maintaining the Syrian regime, what is the core disagreement between them then?**

The disagreement, of course, is on the issue of Assad. Until now, Russia sticks to him because they see in the Assad clan the only guarantee for their domination over Syria. Russia is no less imperialist than the United States, and is even more brutal if you consider what it did to Chechnya although it is part of the Russian Federation (the equivalent of one of the United States).

By the social standard, the Russian regime is even more right-wing neoliberal than the US regime is. There is a flat individual income tax of 13 percent in Russia vs. a cap of 40 percent for the US federal tax, not counting additional local taxes. The Russian corporate tax is 20 percent versus 35 percent US federal tax, again not counting local taxes. The wildest Republican would dream of implementing something like this in the United States.

Putin is also playing the religious card by bringing the Russian Orthodox Church to bless his intervention in Syria as a Holy War. The view of some people on the Left who live in a time warp and believe that Russia is somehow the continuation of the Soviet Union and that Vladimir Putin is the heir of Vladimir Lenin, is quite preposterous.

**But what is Russia’s imperialist interest in Syria?**

It is that Syria is a country where Russia has air and naval bases and is reacting as Washington would react with regard to any country where it has such bases. The Assad regime is [Moscow’s closest strategic ally](#) in the region.

This is also a way for Putin to tell all dictators: “You can count on me to defend you against popular uprisings much more than you can count on Washington. Contrast my support for Assad with the US abandonment of Mubarak.” This is why Putin has become such a good friend with Egypt’s new dictator Sisi.

**So Putin wants to improve his imperialist role in the Arab world?**

Moscow’s actions are based on the same logic as Washington’s. Russia sees Syria as a strategic asset in the same way as the United States saw Vietnam in the past, or any regime that Washington was willing to support by direct military intervention.

Today, however, Putin is more prone on direct military intervention than Obama is. US imperialism is still affected by the legacy of the “Vietnam syndrome,” which has actually been revived by the terrible failure in Iraq even though both Bush senior and Bush junior had believed they managed to get rid of it.

Putin is taking advantage of this in being more assertive than Washington over Syria by fully backing the Assad regime, whereas the United States is not supporting the Syrian opposition in any comparable way. Washington’s support to the opposition is more the stuff of jokes than anything serious. Whereas Moscow and Tehran are providing the Syrian regime with full-spectrum support, including a heavy involvement of proxy fighters on the part of Iran.

**The Saudi kingdom and other Gulf monarchies have been keen on destroying the uprisings. Sisi’s coup in Egypt would not have been possible without full Saudi support. Will the Saudis be able to play this role for a long time? What prospects for change are there in**



## Gulf countries, you think?

That's a major problem indeed. The Saudi Kingdom has always been a key linchpin of reaction in the region. That's the role it has played ever since it came into existence because it has consistently been the most reactionary state on earth. If you consider ISIS as a state, you can say it is the Saudis' competitor in that respect. They have a lot of common features and share a similar history, except that one was founded in the early twentieth century and the other one century later with very different means.

The Saudi Kingdom is a major reactionary stronghold in the region, but its ability to play a direct military role is more in its direct environment, in the Gulf. It played a key role in [helping the Bahraini monarchy](#) quell the uprising in Bahrain. In Yemen the Saudi kingdom is intervening on the side of the coalition government that resulted from the Yemeni compromise of November 2011, in opposition to the deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh now allied with the Houthis. This is basically another clash between two counterrevolutionary camps, as we have discussed.

In Syria, the Saudi regime plays a role but mostly through funding, not through direct intervention. For our terrible bad luck, the Saudis took hold of a country that turned out to have the largest oil reserves in the world. This gave them tremendous means that they have been using for decades in helping their US overlord and spreading their deeply reactionary fundamentalist ideology.

In many ways, you can't understand the strength of fundamentalism in the contemporary Islamic world if you ignore the crucial factor for its development that the Saudi Kingdom constitutes. In the long run, this ultra-reactionary stumbling block must go if the regional revolutionary process is to reach a progressive outcome.

The two poles of counterrevolution in the Arab region are supported by rival forces: the United States and Russia, the Gulf monarchies and Iran. Don't forget that Iran is also an Islamic fundamentalist regime, albeit of a different type. The Arab revolutionary process is facing all these forces.

**With the amount of money they have, it seems hopeless that Saudi Arabia could change. I was wondering what you think the prospects for change in this country are?**

Well, they have a lot of money, but there is a lot of poverty in the Saudi kingdom nonetheless. The paradox of such a rich state having so much poverty — among the natives, let alone the migrants — generates deep resentment against the monarchy.

The crudest expressions of opposition to the monarchy until now have been outbidding it in its own brand of Islamic ultra-fundamentalism, which is known as [Wahhabism](#). This was the case for the Mecca insurgency in 1979, and more recently with Al-Qaeda. Everyone knows that fifteen of the nineteen attackers of 9/11 were Saudi nationals. Al-Qaeda had and still has a large number of members holding Saudi citizenship.

Such opposition has been the only one managing to develop in the Saudi kingdom precisely because it was able to work from within the ideology of the regime, whereas it is much more difficult for a progressive opposition to develop there, let alone a feminist one or a Shia one for that matter.

A progressive potential exists in the kingdom nevertheless, and it will explode sooner or later. It will explode in the same way that it did in other regional countries. After all, the shah in Iran had a very repressive regime, which many people believed was immune to collapse.

Yet, when the revolutionary wave started in Iran the late 1970s, we saw how quickly it managed to

bring down the Shah's regime. There are no eternal regimes, and certainly not the Saudi regime, which is based on terrible oppression, huge inequality, and appalling treatment of women.

**Considering your familiarity with the radical left in the Arab world, are you optimistic about the prospects of Arab revolution? Is it fair to say that the success of the Arab revolution is ultimately about the success of labor mobilization?**

To summarize what we have been discussing from the beginning of our conversation, I'm still hopeful, even though I wouldn't describe myself as optimistic. There's a qualitative difference here. Hope is the belief that there is still a progressive potential. Optimism is the belief that this potential will win.

I'm not betting on its winning because I know how difficult the task is, all the more in that building alternative progressive leaderships has to start almost from scratch in many countries. The task is daunting, it's huge, but it's not impossible. No one expected such an impressive progressive uprising as that of 2011.

The long-term revolutionary process in the region will be measured in decades rather than years. From a historical perspective, we are still in its initial stages. This should be a major incentive for intensive action to build progressive movements able to take the lead. The alternative is further descent into barbarism and a general collapse of the regional order into the kind of terrible chaos that we see developing already in quite a few countries.

As for labor, when I speak of progressive leaderships, it goes for me without saying that the workers' movement should be a key part of them. That's why the countries where there is a bigger potential in that regard, such as Tunisia and Egypt, should show the way. We could then witness a snowballing effect.

Let us not forget also that the Arab region is not on another planet. It is part of the global setting, and very close to Europe. Thus, the development of the radical left in Europe can also have an important influence on the development of its equivalent in the Arab region.

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**P.S.**

\* "What Happened to the Arab Spring?". Jacobine. 12.17.15:  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/achcar-arab-spring-tunisia-egypt-isis-isil-assad-syria-revolution/>

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