

The British Left, Syria, Daesh, imperialism - Long read: What do Syrian and Lebanese activists think?

Saturday 9 January 2016, by [AOURAGH Miriyam](#), [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 2 January 2016).

Miriyam Aouragh introduces interviews with activists Syrian and Lebanese that aim to cut through the confusion that has clouded much of the British left in recent months. The activists' responses to questions about the nature of Daesh, the role of sectarianism and whether class can still be a source of analysis in the uprising, how we should regard the Kurdish resistance, what differences does receiving weapons or help from western powers make, and what can we do here to support their movements, follow Miriyam's introduction. [1]

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The attacks in Paris in November provoked greater imperial frenzy and added more questions to an already confusing narrative about Syria. The dynamics of the ensuing debate, shaped by media populism and ruling class opportunism, have been very frustrating. As such, there has been an increase in confusing positions and vague assessments in our own progressive circles.

In the current contradictory context, our political analyses need reassembling. Adjustment is a fairly normal process for progressive movements to undergo. Clear analyses with regard to increasing military operations in Syria are crucial because the Paris attacks created the condition for Britain to engage (or, rather, continue) in this endless, pitiless, warfare.

The vote on the war in Parliament brought the sense of an impasse regarding a political position around Syria to the surface. It is infuriating to see the debate about Syria being hi-jacked by Blairites and Tories in order to strike at Jeremy Corbyn. Moreover, the realignments of global imperialism - the simultaneous condition of a continuous US hegemony and a relative decline - have implications for radical analyses. So does the fact that much of the current devastating events are, in part, consequences of the massive Arab uprisings that have sent shockwaves through the region since 2011.

After 9/11 and the "War on Terror" our position as radical left groups was clear: all-out against war. And for that matter we did not really have any relations with groups in Iraq or Afghanistan. But revolutionary upheavals alter our positions. These revolutions and subsequent counter-revolutions, together with the larger political-economic conditions in which they emerged, greatly impact the socio-economic and political uprisings and the strategies and tactics of movements. This leads to at

least two shifts: enforcing on activists in these regions an incredibly difficult task to manoeuvre between local and global dynamics and between survival and death, and it influences the political tactics of activists here and our politics of solidarity and anti-imperialism. At least they should have done so.

It has for that reason been striking to see a vast amount of articles full of analyses, theories and prognoses – and not shy about providing urgent ‘advice’ – made without citing activists from the region. And – and this is probably one of the causes – without engaging those active for/in the Syrian cause present here in the UK who have organic links to Syria. In fact, there has been a framing of groups like Syrian Solidarity Movement UK (SSM) and Planet Syria as pro-war (because some people in those groups have supported a no fly zone option) on the one hand, and, on the other, charging them as having a malicious agenda to destroy the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), i.e. seeking to take from us that which we have helped build –leaving us without an anti-war movement altogether. These groups have been artificially constructed in the leftist imaginary as part of the problem. In other words, it has been deemed not necessary to account for such groups. For some comrades they are even a liability. What does that say about the larger ideas and challenges they represent though?

On a meta-level, the Syrian “uprising”, in the sense of those continuing to keep the small roots and legacies intact for the next round of uprisings, or just for the sake of dignity continuing to survive, seem to have disappeared from our discourse. And even the left accepts by now the full civil war narrative. The idea of a (civil) war is not untrue, but it is only part of the truth.

Syria in 2011 was not a society, like Iraq by 2003, paralyzed after years of sanctions on top of a brutal dictatorship: it has experienced one of the most extraordinary social uprisings in recent history. What is more, we know the people who are taking part in this uprising, some even directly because of our international activist networks in the region. In other words, there are agents to account for: there are comrades to extend solidarity and support to, and above all there is an abundance of knowledge to benefit from. Should these people not be the prime source of our knowledge?

The divisive narrative around Daesh – whether based on inadequate information or offered in a dichotomous format – has strongly shaped our debates. You are either with foreign intervention or against intervention. There is also the notion that Daesh is overpowering, a force that eclipses everything else: the greatest fascist threat of the new century.

Alternatively, because of its anti-Western propaganda, some don’t see Daesh as counter-revolutionary. Some (due to the group’s presence in a proxy imperial setting), see it as anti-imperialist. But none of this relates to real life. Today’s reality is one gigantic paradox. Born from the carnage of the “War on Terror” and bred by the racism in Europe, Daesh is not only a threat to US (and its regional lackeys’) imperialism, it is also (also, we don’t dare to say “foremost”) the executioner of our friends, our comrades. It has also come to represent the doom of thousands of working class families: fatalities of their severe sectarian ideology that has little to do with Bashar al Assad’s regime or of Obama, Hollande or Cameron’s geopolitical threat. To see it otherwise has astounded people involved in Middle East activism.

Firstly, the typical top-down assessments those perspective emanates from arouses indignity, produces a demoralising paralysis. For many the idea of solidarity is meaningless – it turns out that the archaic principle of internationalism is sacrificed for the monotone “the enemy is at home” focus. Hence, and secondly, what does “our real priority is Cameron” or “support for Syrians is fine but best done by their communities” as we often notice in commentaries, mean? This notion is occasionally even accompanied by the paternalistic complaint of ‘identity politics’. Sometimes it

seems as if our cities, movements here do not include people that have roots there. The idea of the domestic ruling class (enemy) is not (probably never was) a singularity: one cannot wave off criticism about the lack of solidarity or the disturbing pro-Assad sentiments emanating from some at StWC rallies, by saying that our focus should be first and foremost on the British Parliament. It is a false dichotomy.

It is no secret that the left has been confused about its stance in general and that this goes beyond a dogmatic anti-war/anti-imperialist analysis. Many of us simply feel unable to take a position because of the real complexities that Syria presents. And many of us exert caution because of the very real dilemma caused by a historic tension between our ruling class's imperialism, internationalism and solidarity in the context of uprisings against a dictatorship that is not the ally of the west.

We can learn from our comrades how to reconcile these seemingly contradictory positions. It is also clear that this confusion is due to the general lack of context and knowledge "from below" and "from within". In fact, what happened to our comrades and their voices that could inform us, and help us to disentangle all these confusing positions. Why not "shut up and listen" – to what our comrades from there have to say? Just for a moment – before we pick up again and redefine our positions based on our own objective conditions. What follows is a small, and probably inept, attempt to help us to do this.

We presented a set of questions to different people, from different backgrounds and cities in Lebanon and Syria [2] – all involved and struggling for, perhaps against all odds, a non-sectarian and progressive outlook. In a series of questions distilled from the on-going debates in the UK we asked the respondents about a variety of subject, including the role of Daesh, sectarianism, the Kurdish resistance, as well as the issue of military intervention and support abroad. Most interviewees picked a few questions. Some referred us to other important voices, while one aborted the interview due to the loss of a comrade who was kidnapped and executed by Daesh. Others were not sure how to think of solidarity at all any more after organising – often in vain – for five years. For example, Razzan replied: "How to support us? I really don't know what to say at this point."

Q1 Is Daesh part of the revolution, is it merely counter-revolutionary, does it have an anti-imperialist stance?

Shiar (Syrian)

Of course Daesh is not part of the revolution! It has been fighting, killing and kidnapping Syrian revolutionary forces from its very beginning, while avoiding, and even collaborating with, the regime until they were forced to fight each other (still only to some extent) because the international rules of the game changed. Neither is Daesh – and Jabhat al-Nusra for that matter – simply a counter-revolutionary force. The revolution and the subsequent war were merely the context or the opportunity that allowed them to emerge and rise. It is more accurate, in my opinion, to talk about multiple revolutions and counter-revolutions unleashed in Syria – and the whole region more broadly – some of which are of a progressive nature or potential and others reactionary. And I use the word "revolution" here in a broad sense, to mean fundamental changes in power structures and values that take place violently in a relatively short period of time. Revolutions are not necessarily progressive, neither are all counter-revolutions necessarily reactionary.

Daesh depends largely on foreign jihadists, who are fighting in Syria to impose a specific version of extremist Islamic rule that is alien to most locals. They have nothing to do with the revolution. If this is not a form of imperialism or colonialism, then I don't know what is. Moreover, Daesh has been

secretly collaborating with various imperialist regimes (Syrian, Iranian, Turkish, Saudi, etc.) depending on their interests and the changing rules of engagement. So I really can't understand how anyone can call them "anti-imperialist" just because of their stated opposition to the West (which is largely rhetorical and does not go beyond terrorist acts).

Farah (Lebanese)

We definitely regard Daesh as a reactionary and an anti-revolutionary force. I was shocked reading the other day a statement issued by an Italian Maoist party explaining their position in support of Daesh as anti-imperial! It really shocks me that there are sections of the Left still discussing the nature of Daesh, with the same binary thinking that they have been employing to set their positions regarding the Assad regime! Is it anti-imperialist? Or is it anti-revolutionary? This binary thinking made a section of the Left support Assad while he was slaughtering the revolution under the pretext that he is fighting imperialism! Let's make it clear, Daesh is the result of Western imperialism and the reign of the authoritarian regimes in the Arab region. Daesh is the result of the state's rule of terror and the imperial so-called "War on Terror". The solution for us is of course to oppose reactionary forces such as Daesh.

But this is not enough. If we want to build a democratic alternative we have to condemn Western imperialism, and also and on an equal ground, the authoritarian regimes with their sectarian and repressive policies that have ruled us for so long. If these sections of the Left, want to build a position, regarding Syria, probably they need to listen, or in this case read, what people on the ground in Syria have been saying. This placard, for example [see image below], that was written in Aleppo in January 2014, represents my position: "Assad will not be overthrown if ISIS is not overthrown". For people who are directly hit by this bloody war, it's crystal clear: no defeat of Daesh is possible without the overthrow of Assad regime. If this Left will grant itself the authority to ask the Syrian people who they want to be their butcher then the project of this Left is doomed to be a big failure politically and ethically.

Ghassan (Lebanese)

I agree with Farah that Daesh is a counter-revolutionary force and I am not sure how it could be construed as "anti-imperialist", knowing its links to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. However, I am really concerned how parts of the left tend to ignore its positions regarding society in general (women, gays, etc.). Although it is an excuse used by many liberals to support bombings, it does not mean that there is no truth to it. We must, of course, oppose the bombings and the foreign interventions (from all sides as it seems right now). But the solution is not to support Daesh - rather, to look at other forces in the revolution, the revolutionary left and local committees, for example, which Joseph, Razzan, and others have written extensively about but have been ignored to a large extent.

Joseph (Syrian)

It's clear that Daesh is counter-revolutionary. In addition to what Ghassan and Farah said I think the problem of many sections of the left internationally is that they understand imperialism as a single actor (the West or the US) and not as a system with competing capitalist powers that we should all oppose. Therefore Russia is put outside of the picture. This is one thing. The other problem (which is linked to the first one) has been the analysis of actors, whether state or organisations, according to their foreign policies, leading some to speak of anti-imperialism in the case of Syria, Hezbollah, Iran and even Daesh, and not analysing them, as Ghassan said, according to their policies regarding the society or country in which they exist. In addition to this there is a sort of reductionism in the analysis. For instance, "economism" shapes how we analyse the region, putting aside sectarianism, feminism, struggle against homophobia, secularism, etc... leading to a situation where liberals often

appear to be the only ones speaking about such matters. This larger problem in my view is linked to economism and the way that Islamic fundamentalism groups are still perceived by many on the left as “reformists” or some sorts of “anti-imperialists”, or more generally as real authentic groups of the region representing Islam. They don’t make the difference between a Muslim believer and an Islamist, many times mixing both, which is very essentialist and problematic.

Razzan (Syrian)

The approach to fighting ISIS has always been a Eurocentric one: dealing with ISIS on our own with no need of Syrians’ feedback on, or expertise in, the matter. Without learning from the history. This has been evident from the very first days of the US bombing Syria – Nusra specifically – without coordination with Syrian brigades or activists on the ground, which has caused lots of anger from people living in areas that were bombed. Imagine if your organisation is being funded by a UK or US INGO [international non-governmental organisation], and these states bombed and killed a child or family. How do you imagine the people would react towards the employees of an NGO funded by Britain or America? Many civil society workers were threatened after the international bombings.

The result has been further hatred towards international military support. There is no regards given of Syrian lives that are already in danger due to ISIS and regime bombardments. The international military support is not to help Syrian lives, but to lessen the threat on their borders that are shut in the face of those who are fleeing Syria – from ISIS mostly. So it does make a negative difference. It makes things worse. It fuels terrorism, extremism.

A friend from Raqqa is on ISIS’s list of wanted people. Raqqa partly consists of big families and it’s a very communitarian society. So if one member of the family is anti-ISIS, the rest of the family would know and hence the word might go out. What I am certainly aware of is that since anti-ISIS sentiment is associated with any anti-ISIS military actions, the people in the face of Daesh pay the price. This is my own experience with people living in liberated Idleb in 2013.

Rima (Lebanese)

It is hard to say something comprehensive about Daesh at this moment. I was part of a group of activists who occasionally meet comrades from Syria. One of the comrades was captured by Daesh and killed during one of our workshops. He had contributed enormously with information and data on the living conditions under Daesh in Raqqa before he was captured.

Yasser (Syrian)

Daesh is the head of the counter-revolution and the worst nightmare that humanity could face. We have had as a movement (Citizens Movement) an office in the city of Raqqa after the fall of the regime. I was the Director, but we closed it after Daesh took control of the city. We continued our activity clandestinely within the city.

Ramz (Syrian)

ISIS is the vanguard of counter-revolution. I never had direct personal experience with ISIS but members of our group were arrested and imprisoned by them. Some of our comrades living in territories ruled by ISIS were forced to escape when ISIS discovered their political disobedience.

Q2 Is sectarianism a dominant factor? Is there a civil war? Can class still be a source of analysis for the dynamics of the uprising?

Shiar

The problem with the term civil war is that it reduces complex socio-political dynamics to a savage “civil war” between religious sects. It stems largely from the Western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism. As I understand it, the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] uprisings were – broadly speaking – triggered by varying combinations of political repression, economic deprivation and social disintegration, which made people in those countries feel more and more marginalised, powerless, humiliated and undignified. Even if they are linked to the wider processes of global politics and economics – like everything else – these are specific local dynamics that cannot be simply seen as a direct result of imperialism and globalisation. Syria was perhaps the most acute manifestation of these dynamics, which is what distinguishes the Syrian revolution from the (first) Egyptian revolution, for example.

The mass protests in Syria started and remained, for quite a few months into the revolution, largely confined to marginalised, neglected regions and rural areas such as Dar’a, Idlib, Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, the poor suburbs and slums of Damascus, etc. Coupled with strong regional identities that made it easier for these people to break away from the regime’s discourse, this meant the Syrian revolution was – at least in the beginning – an almost classic revolt by the marginalised rural poor.

Assad’s economic liberalisation of the country, celebrated by the West as welcomed “reforms”, was carried out through a Mafia-like network of high ranking military and security officers partnering with big businessmen, which was largely concentrated in and benefited the traditional bourgeois urban centres. Moreover, economic liberalisation was not accompanied by “political liberalisation” that could have made these “reforms” more acceptable by people – save for a brief period of political freedom, known as the “Damascus Spring” in 2000-1, which was soon heavily repressed as the regime feared too much freedom may destabilise its rule.

It is true that the subsequent, full-fledged internationalised war has changed these socio-economic-political revolutionary dynamics (for now) but that does not mean that we should abandon our analysis of the origins and beginning of the revolution. With the militarisation of the revolution in late 2011 and early 2012 – first by the regime forces and militias and the protesters’ resorting to arms to defend themselves, then by the interference of regional and international powers in support of this militant faction or that – the above-mentioned socio-political conflicts gradually developed into full-fledged wars. Most military operations by opposition and Islamist armed groups were initially directed against the regime. As military advances were made and power bases consolidated, however, “infighting” over territory, weapons, spoils and influence started to surface, sometimes distracting from what was supposed to be the main battle.

By the end of 2013, there were at least four main poles or parties to the war, with various other smaller centres of (armed) power revolving around them because they shared similar worldviews and/or similar goals and backers with the main poles – though they should not be readily lumped into one basket. I have previously called this Syria’s “multi-party conflict” that turned into a “multi-way war”.

A dualistic view continues to dominate much of the debate and writing on the war in Syria, often painting what is happening in the country as one war between the regime and the opposition forces, or between government forces and Islamist terrorists, or between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and so on and so forth. This dualism may partly explain the West’s prioritisation of the war on Daesh and

ignoring, or postponing, an inevitable confrontation with the Syrian regime and its backers – as if a state can only have one “enemy” at a time.

Anthony (Lebanese)

Syria is going through a war on the class war that started with the Syrian revolution. Both Assad and Daesh are at the lead of this war on the working classes. The sectarianism we see in Syria is the main feature of that. Sectarianism is an ideological smokescreen, it hides the crisis of the Syrian bourgeoisie and the demands of the working people for social, political and economic freedom. This was the basis of the Syrian revolution, through the popular slogan “one, one, one, the Syrian people are one”, and it continues to be so. Many Syrians I’ve met say that sectarianism was not a main feature of life in Syria before the crackdown of the Assad regime on the revolution. Everything has changed now, and the sectarianism we see today is “born out of the contradictions of Arab society and shows its ugliest forms in times of crisis” – it is another form of nationalism, and seeks, in the end, to accumulate capital and the means of production and power to an elite (whether for Assad or for Daesh’s leadership) while exploiting the working people and the proletariat. We see one of the worst kinds of exploitation in Syria: exploitation of life, working class people recruited as soldiers to kill other soldiers. Bassem has started with this analysis, we need to build on it.

Yasser

Since the first days of the revolution the regime and its loyalists tried to transform the uprising into a sectarian war. Today, sectarianism is among the main ideological orientations for the competing groups: the regime factions, its Iranian allies, as well as some opposition groups. I think it is appropriate to say that since approximately a year the situation has become like a civil war. At the same time, though, some factions are explicitly non-sectarian, cross-confessional initiatives, such as the Declaration of Damascus, the Movement for Citizenship, for example, as well as leftist groups such as the Democratic Left Party, the National Democratic Bloc and the Socialist Union. But I don’t think the revolution emerged as a class struggle as some think, but as a political revolution during which economic factors played a major role in the indignation of Syrians. The reasons for the Syrian uprisings are the struggle for freedom and dignity and against repression.

Joseph

Of course sectarianism is an important factor and it has increased since the beginning of the revolution importantly: first, because of the regime through various means (killing, media, releasing Islamists and jihadists, etc...) and then by the development of Islamic fundamentalist forces. In addition, the sectarian discourse, on a propaganda level, of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and Iran, fuelling sectarianism, in addition to their actions.

This said, this does not mean that class analysis does not work, and sectarianism has to be understood as a tool to control and use the popular masses and for the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie to take the lead and control of popular movements. Sectarianism is a way to redirect socio-political frustrations against other “enemies”. This is strengthened by the lack of democratic and social forces on the ground.

This does not mean that cross-sectarian movements are not possible, and actually they still exist in various regions of Syria. Popular movements in Syria are still struggling for the initial objectives of the revolution and against sectarianism. In addition we have seen this summer in Iraq and Lebanon a cross-sectarian popular movement challenging all the sectarian bourgeois forces. This should be put forward much more, these are the ways to defeat authoritarian regimes and Islamic fundamentalism.

Ramz

Sectarianism is one of the most significant elements of conflict in Syria. The revolution switched from a political revolution against a totalitarian regime to look more like a civil war when the armed conflict took over. But, yes, there are many democratic and secular opposition forces and cross-sectarian communities such as Citizen Movement, the Democratic Bloc, the National Bloc, etc. Although they are weak and isolated now.

The internal/national factors were relegated in the conflict while the regional factors, elements and interests became the determining factor. However, you cannot find a solution to the conflict without resolving the question of political power and without the departure of Al-Assad and his gang.

Q3 Can we regard the Kurdish resistance as the alternative? Are they non-sectarian, for instance?

Shiar

I suppose by “Kurdish resistance” you mean the Kurdish armed forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its Syrian offshoot, the PYD [Democratic Union Party], which are often described as the “third way”. I personally don’t agree and don’t believe that they really represent a third way. If anything, they seem to follow their own separate way, parts of which intersect with the events in Syria, while others follow their own specific Kurdish dynamics. As far as the Syrian revolution is concerned, these forces are still oscillating between the regime and the opposition (and now between the US and Russia), flirting or conflicting with this side or that depending on the situation on the ground. They are yet to settle on a clear, consistent position, or to be forced to do so by changing geopolitical equations (the battle in Kobanê, the US-led war on Daesh and so on).

The PYD’s political pragmatism and its thirst for power are two important factors to understand the party’s dealings with the regime, the revolution, the FSA [Free Syrian Army], and even the Kurds themselves. Moreover, the PKK is a highly ideological, nationalist party based on a strict military regime and blind loyalty. It still thrives on the apotheosis of the leader and the notion of one party leading the state and society. In this sense, it is not very different to so many leftist parties that have been riddled with these Stalinist-Leninist plagues.

I would like to believe that the party is changing and is rethinking its ideology and practices (the PKK and PYD have been rebranding and promoting themselves in the West as an “anarchist” movement). But until they really change, I cannot understand how anyone can call it an anarchist movement, or even a legitimate representative of people’s struggle for freedom and justice. But the reality is, so many of their repressive practices remain the same – e.g. the PYD forces recently shot live ammunition at peaceful demonstrations because the protest was organised by a rival Kurdish faction.

In fact, I do not doubt for a moment that the PYD – if things carried on like this – will re-produce an oppressive, totalitarian regime, just like what the Ba’ath party or the two ruling parties in Iraqi Kurdistan did – bearing in mind the differences in their experiences, of course. The same applies to many of the other Syrian opposition factions, from the radical Islamist forces to the nationalist leftist parties that lean towards fascism. The hope is that the revolutionary movement will continue and give birth to different forms of organisation and self-organisation, and to new structures that are more consistent with the original values and goals of the revolution.

Ghassan

As for the Kurdish resistance, while there are secular forces involved that we must support, it has also become entangled in the civil war in Syria and there are some instances where anti-Arab sentiments have led to unfortunate incidents and positions. However, based on the same reasoning above, it is important to discern between the various forces.

Joseph

Regarding the Kurds, I agree with Ghassan: contradictions exist with PYD (the Syrian PKK), which acts often as an authoritarian organisation that has not hesitated to repress popular demonstrations and pro-revolution activists. And some anti-Arab sentiments do exist in certain regions (for historic reasons of oppressions and colonisation by the Ba'ath regime) – see the last reports of Amnesty on this region. One thing: the criticism against the PKK can only be made constructively if someone has a clear position regarding the Kurdish issue, meaning support for self determination. The problem is some people criticise them without criticising the Arab chauvinism of the majority of the Syrian opposition regarding the Kurdish issue.

Yasser

The experience of the Kurdish areas is special and a positive experience in many features. However, the issue is that the PYD is a non-Syrian political project (decided in Mount Kendal) and does not fall within the objectives of the Syrian revolution and the project of state citizenship. It is correct that the PYD is beyond sectarianism; nevertheless, it has nurtured and helped create contradictions and conflicts of another type, with a dimension of nationalism.

Elia (Lebanese)

The Kurdish question is indeed a complicated one, especially that the forces that represent them (YPG, PYD) have, for the most part, an opportunistic relationship with the Syrian revolution, trying to navigate through the current war with the fewest enemies possible and the most gains on the ground as possible. This “real politik” of the revolution has seen them ally with Assad on some fronts, coordinate with US air-force at some times, cleanse villages, and sometimes ally themselves with the FSA (Free Syrian Army) to fight with Daesh. I highly recommend the piece by Leila Al Shami on the selective solidarity around the world with Kobane.

Ramz

The Kurdish experience will probably be what will prevent the establishment of an Islamic State [authority] in the whole of Syria. The Kurdish people do not have a tendency to religious extremism but their political factions don't accept the Islamist ideology in essence because Daesh opposes the Kurdish identity. Nevertheless, due to their own opportunism Kurdish forces do not really help setting up a national, overall, Syrian programme. Some of their chauvinist attitudes even lead to tensions between Arabs and Kurds.

Q4 Is the issue of military intervention relevant: does receiving weapons from or granting help to Western powers make a difference?

Shiar

As much as I am (theoretically) against foreign (state) intervention and militarisation, I think this question is academic and we're way past that point. When talking about wars and armed struggles, we have to be realistic. If there were other, less dodgy sources of arms and other material support

available, I can assure you that many Syrians fighting today would not have had to seek help from the US and the Gulf countries and to forge alliances with “Islamist fundamentalists” actually fighting on the ground.

We cannot defend the rebels’ right to defend themselves, then condemn them for their reliance on the West or the Gulf without identifying a realistic alternative of support (there is none at the moment, it seems). Asking the rebels to demand arms with no strings attached is not going to get us anywhere because there are no such arms (with no strings attached) in the real world.

Anthony

I cannot speak for the Syrian revolutionaries regarding intervention. My position is against Western military support, but it is not my livelihood that is destroyed, my community that’s killed and displaced, or my own life that’s on the line. What I can say is that the weaponising of the Syrian revolution, from the US, from the Gulf, from western Europe, from Iran, have turned it into a bloody massacre, and the military forces operating in Syria today (whether armed groups on the ground or bombings from the air) have caused nothing more than non-discriminating murder.

We stand firmly against military support to Assad or Daesh, or the reactionary counter-revolutionary forces, and for the full and unconditional support of the Syrian socialist revolutionaries and their demands on the ground. The socialist parties in the West need to turn their ears to the ground, to put in the great effort of steering their statements, slogans, positions and actions away from their own political benefits at home and towards a daring answer to one question: what do the Syrian revolutionaries need? The phrase “shut up and listen to what they have to say” puts it well. This is a process that needs to start now.

Ghassan

Our position, ever since the war on Iraq has been to oppose imperialist wars in the region, but also to oppose all types of dictatorships, regardless of their pseudo-anti-imperialist positions. The Assad regime, for example, although against “the West” is working hand in hand with Russian imperialism. The same could be applied to Daesh, Hezbollah, and other forces entangled in the Syrian situation. The question of sectarianism is also extremely important, since it has been detrimental to the revolutionary process in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, etc. and cannot be ignored by the left.

Tammam (Syrian)

In truth, it is difficult to find a reason for the position of the international community on the Syrian issue, without coming up against so-called “conspiracy theory”. Nearly five years have passed since the start of the Syrian tragedy; for five years the Syrians have been exposed, daily, to planned death, in front of the whole world. Is it really convincing that the world still does not know what is happening in Syria?! Is knowing that difficult?! The Syrians are suffering – and have been for five years – not just from death, for death in one of its senses is not suffering; they are suffering from life! Yes, the Syrians have reached a stage beyond death, beyond fear of death. Now they are afraid of their life! A young man from Homs told me that the people of his village, on their way fleeing to Lebanon, felt comfort every time one of them who was injured died, because he would lighten their burdens!

Does the international community, and do the states that are bombing or preparing to bomb the Syrians, truly believe in the pretext of putting an end to terrorism, which was carried out and is carried out, in the end, by European citizens, from France, Belgium, Sweden, Holland, etc. Does this community and do these states believe that the Syrians have reached the point where they fear

living more than dying?!

Well, the Syrians know that they face a fascist regime, the likes of which were extirpated from the world decades ago, but they also know that they face, along with it, a global decision to be silent about their liquidation; they face states on whose territory extremism receives support, and sometimes receives direct or indirect finance from them; and the extremists move from these lands to the regions of struggle, especially the Middle East, coming and going with the greatest of ease, and killing the local inhabitants of these areas, taking part, along with the dictatorial regimes, in forcing those inhabitants to flee; and then they return to their countries as European citizens, while Europe's borders are closed in the face of refugees fleeing, essentially, from their citizens.

What I say in this context will seem exaggerated, it will seem biased, and will seem like a conspiracy theory. But the Syrians, and I among them, have reached a point where we are incapable of knowing the reason for our death. Have you seen it? We no longer want life... we now want to know the reason for our death... that is cheaper than our life.

Yasser

Military support can change the balance, which is now clearly in favour of the regime after the Russian intervention. The Syrian opposition was asking for support from the beginning, but as it never arrived it meant some opposition groups accepted any offer, also coming from Qatar and others [with an agenda]. That help is representing the voice of Islamists in the region and is reinforcing them in Syria. For instance, since 2012 Al Qaida and its Syrian section Al-Nusra received crucial support which allowed them to gain ground in the battlefields against Assad forces. But the military support was conditioned by the integration into an Islamist programme. This is the reason why the moderate Syrian opposition has become so weak. One last point, we understand that "fighting terrorism" is an issue but we should not forget that the basis of terrorism in Syria is the regime. Its practices and its propaganda favoured the emergence of extremism and encouraged terrorism against the revolt of ordinary Syrian people that started with legitimate claims.

Q5 What can we here do to support your cause?

Shiar

On a state policy level, a more nuanced approach to armed conflicts may succeed in persuading the US and its allies to seriously support the moderate Syrian opposition in its multiple wars, rather than insisting that such support should be solely directed, for now, at fighting Daesh, which is what the US administration has been doing. And to be effective, such support should be provided through one unified channel, rather than leaving it to regional powers with conflicting agendas.

On a popular level, there is today more need than ever for "critical solidarity" with the Syrian revolution; a solidarity that does not fall into false binary polarisations and is not, at the same time, "conditional solidarity". Critical solidarity means you support a struggle as a matter of principle, with real, material support, but maintain an active, critical stance toward a particular version or force that claims to represent people's aspirations or capitalises on them for political ends. Without such solidarity, it is likely that we will keep being presented with the false choices of Assad vs. Daesh, or Iran vs. Saudi Arabia and so on.

Yasser

Political solidarity is more important than ever yet political opposition groups do not receive

consistent support. There is an intense political struggle between the opposition and the regime, which obliged many since 2012 to flee from the country or simply stop fighting. You have to know that: the regime targets essentially political and civil activist. No-one from the “democratic side” supported the National-Democratic opposition; international support currently creates or reinforces political power relations. Regional powers started creating oppositions aligned to their political vision: e.g. support mainly goes to military Islamist forces, sometimes aid is distributed to those close to the supporting countries. We can even say that political decisions migrated outside of the country.

Farah

What we request from all the progressive forces in Europe and elsewhere in the world is to show direct, non-hesitant, and courageous support for the Syrian people’s revolution and demands for democracy and social justice. I have never seen in the world similar revolutions that were isolated and deserted such as the Syrian people’s revolution. What we also request is for people to oppose the imperial wars on Syria. The bombings are only aggravating the situation on the ground, giving more power for the regime and Daesh and killing every hope for the rebirth of a popular movement with a progressive horizon. In the Arab region and in Lebanon in particular in 2003 during the war on Iraq we held the slogan “no to war, no to dictatorship”. This slogan continues today to retain its full veracity.

Joseph

In Europe I think the best way to help people struggling in the Middle East is notably as follows:

- Daesh has continuously attacked and killed democratic activists in Raqqa and even elsewhere (in Turkey for example), notably activists from the group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered.
- Speaking and supporting, as Ghassan said, the people still struggling on the ground against the regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces. We have seen in Syria the highest level of self-organisation by the people because the state disappeared. Helping them in all their kind of activities on the ground.
- Rebuilding an anti-war movement based on what Farah spoke about – the “Lebanese experience” of no to interventions and no to dictatorships and actually real solidarity with people in struggle in the region. Today, anti-war movements in the UK and I think the USA are based only on no to foreign interventions and denial of internationalist solidarity and we have seen the results. It’s completely a shame, and Syrians who are pro-revolution are not joining, others as well. I would personally never go any more or participate in the construction of the current Stop the War. I would seek an alternative, and I think space exists to do it, on the principles I spoke about above.
- Welcoming and opening borders to refugees and giving them the conditions in which they can live and not just survive – in other words be able to work, have housing, etc... In Switzerland many joint-experiences with refugees that were very successful.
- Fighting against new laws limiting democratic rights, struggling against Islamophobia.

Ramz

The most important assistance which could be provided to the Syrian people is to pressure governments to find an acceptable political solution by all parties, not just managing the crisis and extending the conflict. In addition to support for secular and democratic movements.

Many initiatives in support of the Syrian uprising and against Assad's regime have surged in the past years. Some of us in the radical left were initially a part of these initiatives. It is probably a reflection of our internal disarray and leftist regroupments that our collaborations in these initiatives have been forsaken. But the fact that groups such as SSM had less "leftist" engagement meant that their content became less and less "leftist" in the sense of for instance a clear position about foreign (western) intervention.

After losing momentum, some of these groups have started to call for – or rather not to resist – a no fly zone. This is being refashioned by StWC as "pro-intervention" with obvious reactionary connotations. However, rather than focusing on support vs. rejection of (western) intervention we should consider the political forces inside these networks and try to understand the desperate context that lead to their positions. They have repeatedly said that for it to be principled, 'military intervention' cannot only an issue of US/UK politics and must includes Russia, Iran, etc., and that Assad's barrel bombs must be stopped. Yes, these arguments might be exploited to promote war, but we also know that an anti-war movement, which has been taking a de-facto pro-Assad position, has lost the legitimacy to make this argument.

Hence, others on the left should make sure that we lose neither side of the argument. But we have learned the hard way that this can only be done from a clear position of solidarity. Syrians are undergoing a tragedy of unimaginable proportions: their cry for help to stop the Assad barrel bombs, the Russian fighter jets, and Daesh's slaughtering are not less valid than their cries against US or British bombs. The possible negative implications of those cries should never be the starting point for a socialist. Internationalism and its pillars – solidarity, empathy, brother/sisterhood – is what drives our struggle.

Further reading recommended by the interviewees:

Available on ESSF (article 3405), [Syria: The PKK and the issue of the self determination of the Kurdish people](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article34051>

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/01/09/the-pkk-and-the-issue-of-the-self-determination-of-the-kurdish-people/>

Available on ESSF (article 36906), [Analysis: Syria's multi-party conflict and multi-way war](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36906>

<https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2015/05/05/syrias-multi-party-conflict-and-multi-way-war/>

Available on ESSF (article 31608), [On the Syrian Revolution and the Kurdish Issue](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article31608>

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/on-the-syrian-revolution-and-the-kurdish-issue-an-interview-with-syrian-kurdish-activist-and-journalist-shiar-nayo/>

<https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/syria-on-the-syrian-revolution-and-the-kurdish-issue-an-interview-with-syrian-kurdish-activist-and-journalist-shiar-nayo/>

Available on ESSF (article 36907), [Response by a Syrian anarchist to the "Toward an anarchist policy on Syria" First of May statement on Syria](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36907>

<https://libcom.org/news/response-syrian-anarchist-first-may-statement-syria-17092013>

Available on ESSF (article 36908), [Sectarianism and the Arab revolutions – On the present roots of the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article31608>

<http://socialistreview.org.uk/388/sectarianism-and-arab-revolutions>

Available on ESSF (article 36909), [The struggle for Kobane: an example of selective solidarity - “The same solidarity extended to the Kurds must be extended to all revolutionary Syrians”](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36909):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36909>

<https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/the-struggle-for-kobane-an-example-of-selective-solidarity/>)

P.S.

* Long read: What do Syrian and Lebanese activists think?. RS21 on January 2, 2016:

<http://rs21.org.uk/2016/01/02/long-read-what-do-syrian-and-lebanese-activists-think/#comments>

Footnotes

[1] The author would like to thank Ashley Inglis for helping copy-edit the text as well as all the correspondents for taking the time to think about the questions and answer them so insightfully.

[2] Including Lebanese comrades is important considering the obvious close relations historically/socially, Lebanese dynamics as well as the “spill-over” effect of the Syrian developments.