

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Syria

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The intervention by rival imperialist powers, the US and Russia, and by regional gendarmes Turkey and Saudi Arabia has conspired against the popular forces of the Syrian democratic revolution and the Kurdish struggle for self-determination ? but those forces are still fighting and still deserving of solidarity.

A large part of the Western left and radical media have written off the struggle against the totalitarian Assad regime in Syria as irretrievably lost. Effectively, for them, the counterrevolution has triumphed. And alongside them, there are also those who never supported the revolutionary uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the first place.

Despite their left credentials, many of this latter group supported the fascistic Baathist regime and its counterrevolution. The former group, on the other hand, initially supported the uprising but, when the bloody regime's repression transformed this civil society uprising into a cruel civil war, they announced that the revolution had been crushed and there was nothing left to support. And when the forces of jihadist political Islamism became a prominent factor, the revolution for them was obviously over and done with.

The ?left? opponents of the revolution include various strands of Stalinism, but also quite a few US and UK ?anti-imperialists?, always on the lookout for ?progressive? regimes to cheerlead against their own countries? imperialisms: sometimes nice and presentable (Hugo Chavez), sometimes less so (Robert Mugabe). When the Arab Spring of 2011 spread beyond US-backed regimes (Tunisia, Egypt) they immediately began to suspect foul play.

Libya, with the Nato bombing, was the first of the Arab Spring revolutions to be interpreted as some sort of CIA plot. The Syrian revolutionary upsurge was then seen as a variant of a US-sponsored ?colour revolution? against a regime which, whatever its blemishes in term of human rights, they regarded as a pillar of resistance to the USA, Israel and their reactionary Arab allies, most notably Saudi Arabia. They also accepted the regime's self-evaluation as a haven of secularism and rights for ethnic minorities and women.

Obviously, the rhetorical support given to Syrian rebels by President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and their eventual call for Assad to go was proof enough for them, if any were needed, of the Syrian revolution's ?fake? character. Guardian journalist Seumas Milne expressed this sort of viewpoint most clearly.

The first grouping, which one could call fair-weather friends of the Syrian revolution, consists of those, like Counterfire and the Alliance for Workers? Liberty, who supported the original mass uprising, but who decided that it was over when it turned into a bloody civil war in which Islamists began to come to the fore. Workers? Liberty in particular said recently that ?A rebel victory is now unlikely. Even if it happened, in anything like the current balance of forces, it would signify triumph for factions of reactionary fundamentalists with a sectarian agenda.?1

The heroic defence of Kobane and the fight of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) against the Islamic State (IS) have revived their friendly attention, but they and others like them continue to ignore the areas of secular and popular resistance in the south of the country.

Others, Counterfire in particular, based their decamping from the revolution on its leaders' appeals for US support and their receipt of small amounts of material aid through intermediaries, seeing this as clear evidence of a 'US takeover' of Syria. The idea that Washington, which has been forced to largely abandon Afghanistan and Iraq, into which it poured so much American blood and treasure, will blithely invade or occupy Syria, is frankly laughable.

The revolution still lives This journal, on the other hand, has continued to defend those Syrian rebel forces that have continued to fight the regime, many of which are locally formed militia groups, or deserters from Assad's armed forces. We have continued to support the local committees and rudimentary popular organs trying to organise food supplies and medical treatment under a series of starvation sieges, barrel bomb attacks, and takfiri Islamist terror, including from Islamic State (IS).

Certainly our support, which included the call for all progressive forces to raise funds for weapons and other war materials, does not include political support to the foreign-based representatives of the official Syrian opposition, or to those Free Syrian Army (FSA) commanders on the ground who keep urging the USA to intervene. A US intervention, even a full-scale invasion, would not replace Assad's regime with the democracy that the revolutionaries of 2011 fought and died for. One has only to look at Iraq to see the result of such invasions and occupations.

Without indulging in ridiculous conspiracy theories, however, one can say that the USA is indeed the ultimate parent of IS, as it once was of the warlords and Taliban in Afghanistan, and even of al-Qaeda. This does not mean that those forces are, or ever were simply US puppets. However, because their originators were spawned in the anti-Soviet, late Cold War period, the USA and its regional allies have at various times used them against what they considered to be more dangerous foes, rather as Israel once fostered Hamas against the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). All eventually became Frankenstein's monsters, turning on their parents or masters.

No outside interventions from regional powers, whether from Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Qatar, will bring liberation to the Syrian people. The Saudi assault on Yemen makes this clear. And the recently launched Turkish assault on the swathe of IS-controlled territory separating the Kurdish areas in the north is not intended to liberate the Kurds - indeed 90 per cent of the targets have been PKK-affiliated fighting units. The Turkish aim is to prevent the Kurds creating a contiguous territory, because that might encourage Kurds in Turkey to press harder for their own national rights.

As for the eruption of IS into northern and eastern Syria, this was possible partly because of its huge haul of US weaponry after the rout of the US-trained 'professional Iraqi army', together with some benevolent neutrality from Turkey's authoritarian Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and from Assad himself.

Erdogan acted on the precept that the enemy of my enemy is, if not exactly my friend, then at least no enemy of mine for the time being. At various points, the Turkish border became a porous one for jihadi recruits to IS, for the better part of a year.

For Assad, too, IS was a useful 'ally' on the same principle. For a considerable time, IS abstained from striking directly at Assad's forces, and Assad returned the favour. Meanwhile, IS's barbarous executions and persecutions of secularists, Christians and other minorities strengthened Assad's propaganda: 'it's either me or Armageddon'. In 2014, this even made the USA reconsider its no-deal position towards the

Syrian dictator. In any case, there is now a de facto pact that allows the US Air Force to use Syrian airspace unhindered.

Certainly, the choice between an IS caliphate or a restored totalitarian Baathist dictatorship is a choice between the plague and cholera. Assad has slaughtered and driven from their homes vastly more Syrians than IS has or probably ever will. But both, if they were to win, would wreak terrible revenge on their remaining subjects. Syrians would become, and are already becoming the new Palestinians: a diaspora of refugees with little or no prospect of returning to their homes without the triumph of the revolution over Assad and IS alike.

Nonetheless, grim as the situation in Syria is, developments in various parts of the country show that slowly, painfully slowly, the most reactionary forces are being pushed back and, more importantly, that they can ultimately be beaten.

Islamic State is not invincible

IS's lightning campaign in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, which ended in its seizure of Mosul, its mass executions of prisoners and the repeated headlong flight of IS's state opponents have given IS a reputation for invincibility, which it skilfully fosters on social media with gruesome pictures and videos. Their leaders certainly understand how to use the Western media, intoxicated as it is by all forms of sensationalism, to magnify the effects of their terror exponentially.

IS's recent attacks in France and Tunisia on 26 June are guaranteed to stoke up racist Islamophobia in Europe, isolating members of Europe's Muslim minorities from their non-Muslim fellow citizens.^{2,3} Islamophobia in the media, and from a spectrum of organisations like Pegida in Germany, the Front National in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and Ukip in Britain, deeply alienates young Muslims in Europe.

And young Muslims are right to be angry about such racism, and right too to hate the actions of 'respectable' politicians, with their invasions and occupations in the Middle East and beyond. This, and the failure of larger left forces to attract them instead, 'radicalises' a small stream of recruits to a 'global jihad'.

The other side of IS's terrorist strategy is demonstrated by its near simultaneous attacks in Kuwait,⁴ where 27 people were killed, and in Kobane and Hasakah in Syria's Kurdish regions.⁵ Here the aim is to encourage, and then feed upon, sectarian divisions between Shi'ite and Sunni in Arab and Muslim countries. And the ground for this has already been well-prepared by the ideology of Saudi official Wahhabism.

It should not be forgotten that most of IS's victims are their fellow Muslims. 'Takfir', the practice of excommunicating other Muslims as apostates worthy of death, is both their calling-card and the thing that separates them from the vast majority of Islamist opinion across the Arab world.

The IS attacks in Tunisia, the one state where the democratic gains of the Arab Spring are still in effect, are clearly aimed at harming the economy, provoking state clampdowns and thus fertilising the soil for the growth of like-mindedly takfiri groups there.

In both cases, it suits IS's agenda to draw the Western powers and their Arab allies into a confrontation, whether in the form of the state repression of Muslims in Europe, or of Islamists in the Arab world, or best of all, in the form of increased US military intervention into the quagmire from which Obama has been trying to escape.

IS setbacks, Kurdish and rebel gains The context in which these attacks take place, however, is one of recent setbacks and defeats for IS in Syria. And the agency of these defeats is instructive. They have been inflicted neither by the barrel bombs of the Assad regime, nor by the more sophisticated US bombing campaign supported both by Iran and by Saudi Arabia, but by the conventional military actions of armed fighters from the only genuinely popular forces in the country: the Kurdish minority and the Syrian revolutionaries.

One would not know this to look at the coverage of the Western media, which has largely collapsed Syria's revolutionary civil war into a struggle between the totalitarian Assad regime (now often presented, if very cautiously, as the 'lesser evil'), and the head-chopping, ultra-reactionaries of IS. There is an underlying assumption that IS is constantly on the advance and, thus, a 'threat to our freedoms' that justifies the Western-led military intervention against it.

But the fact is that, despite some headline-grabbing gains, which include IS's capture of Palmyra from the Assad regime in late May 2015, the last few months have seen serious setbacks for IS in Syria, although noticeably not in Iraq. These have come largely at the hands of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in alliance with sections of the FSA, and even, on occasion, with the FSA's Islamist allies.

Kurdish forces captured the strategic Base 93 from IS on 23 June, placing the YPG approximately 50 kilometres from Raqqah, IS's de facto capital in Syria.⁶ In response, IS launched an assault on Kobane, which was eventually repulsed by a combined force of YPG and FSA fighters. There were at least 120 civilian casualties⁷ as a result of IS car bombs, rockets and snipers,⁸ the second mostly deadly attack by IS in this conflict.

A similar story is told in Hasakah, where IS forces are currently fighting a combination of Kurdish, Kurdish-allied Syriac Christian and Assad-loyalist Syrian forces in the city. Over 60,000 civilians have already fled the area, with some estimates expecting up to 200,000 to flee.

The YPG's push to the west

As can be seen from a map published on 17 June,⁹ the past six months have seen the YPG move towards linking together the three disconnected centres of Kurdish population in Syria with the Kurdish region in Iraq, forming a now more or less continuous corridor to the north of IS-held territory.

The YPG's most likely objective in the immediate term would be to push west through IS-held territory around Manbij and the Aleppo satellite town of Al-Bab. This would allow it to link up with the YPG-held Kurdish enclave around Afrin (Efrin). Afrin, surrounded to the north and west by Turkey, is just north of rebel-held Idlib and north-west of an Aleppo still divided between the Assad regime and the Syrian rebels. The corridor between it and Kobane is also a potential corridor for Turkey to reach its allies amongst the Syrian rebels.

In the course of this advance, the Kurdish nationalist PYD, the Syrian sister party of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which controls the YPG and the Kurdish Rojava enclave defended by it, has pursued a policy that might at best be described as pragmatic and, at worst, as extremely shortsighted.

In the region around Kobane, realities on the ground have pushed the YPG into an alliance with the Syrian armed opposition against their common enemy, IS. But in Hasakah and Qamishli, close to the border with Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, the YPG co-exists not with the FSA but with the Assad regime and its allies.

Elsewhere in the country, YPG forces continue to maintain the policy of 'neutrality' between the Assad

regime and the Syrian revolutionaries that the PYD has promoted within Syria's Kurdish minority almost since the beginning of the revolution in March 2011.

The Rojava experiment

The international left has, correctly, rallied to the defence of Rojava, as the force that seemed most capable of resisting the 'barbaric' soldiers of the IS caliphate. In addition, something of a love affair has developed between, on the one hand, Western anarchism and various other leftists, and, on the other, the PYD and its YPG militia.

The basis for this is the PYD's claims to have built popular councils and assemblies, in the course of putting into practice Abdullah Öcalan's theory of 'democratic confederalism' which he adapted from the veteran US anarchist writer Murray Bookchin's book 'Libertarian Municipalism'.

Öcalan, the historic leader of the PKK, still imprisoned in Turkey, has in recent years made an extensive criticism of the PKK's previous methods. He claims to have rejected one-party domination in favour of political pluralism, and nationalism in favour of a multi-ethnic and communitarian policy. The centralised state will 'disappear', to be replaced by a confederation of local communes.

The PYD, co-chaired by Salih Muslim and Asia Abdullah, claims to be committed to 'social equality, justice and the freedom of belief', to 'pluralism, the freedom of political parties', and of course to women's liberation.¹⁰ Indeed, the thing that most impresses foreign leftists visiting Rojava is the attitude of the party and of the YPG towards women. In the YPG, there are the Women's Protection Units (YPJs), with women fighters and commanders reported to be some 7,000 to 10,000 strong.

In all the institutions in Rojava, (including the PYD's leadership) there are two co-chairpersons, one man and one woman. In every town and village there is a Women's House, providing advice, counselling, protection and shelter against domestic violence, honour killings, rape and physical and mental health problems arising from war and displacement traumas.

The PYD's opportunist pragmatism

However, against this picture it has to be remembered that the PYD found itself in control of Syria's majority-Kurdish regions (in which, moreover, only a minority of Syria's Kurds actually live) not by virtue of having led a struggle for Kurdish self-determination against the Assad regime, but as an unexpected by-product of the revolutionary struggle to overthrow that regime elsewhere, a struggle in which the PYD played very little part.

Assad effectively abandoned control of the Kurdish regions to the PYD in the Summer of 2012, at a time when the FSA was close to capturing the capital Damascus, and actually did capture half of Syria's largest city, Aleppo. Prior to this, the PYD had been the Kurdish party most opposed to full Kurdish participation in the popular uprising against Assad's dictatorship.

Nor is this accidental. The PYD, almost uniquely amongst Syria's numerous and often fractious Kurdish nationalist parties, had enjoyed a semi-legal status under Assad's rule, partly as a legacy of the Baathist dictatorship's sponsorship of the PKK's guerrilla struggle against the Turkish state in the 1980s and 1990s.

Many other Syrian Kurds still suspect the PYD of having been behind the murder of anti-regime Kurdish nationalist leader and opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) executive member Mashaal Tammo in October 2011. This event, which provoked a demonstration of 50,000 at his funeral, five of whom died

when security forces shot into the crowd, is often regarded as having been a turning-point in Syrian Kurdish opinion in favour of the revolution.

It followed a brief period in the early stages of the Syrian uprising in which the Assad regime tried to buy off the Kurds by promising to grant citizenship to stateless Kurds in the predominantly Kurdish north-eastern Jazira region around Hasakah and Qamishli, the core of today's Rojava. These were the descendants of roughly 120,000 Kurds whose citizenship had been revoked on spurious grounds in 1962, before the Baathists came to power, in laws that effectively treated them as aliens or as undocumented migrants.

Since then, the PYD's policy of maintaining an effective non-aggression pact with the regime, while Assad starves and demolishes the other parts of the country not under his direct control, has gone alongside its repression of other Kurdish parties, as well as occasional clashes with almost all wings of the Syrian armed opposition: the FSA, Jabhat an-Nusra and the various 'mainstream' Islamist and Salafist formations, many of which have since been grouped together in the Islamic Front.

The PYD justifies its actions to its own base of support by pointing to the fact that the Kurdish regions under its control have been spared the devastation that has been the lot of almost all the rebel-held Arab regions. But this nationalist opportunism may well prove to be their undoing. The rise of IS and the intervention of the Turkish army have created new threats to the Kurds' accidentally-acquired autonomy, one that requires practical cooperation with the popular forces within Syria's Arab majority if it is to be repelled.

Meanwhile, the Assad regime has declared itself 'ready to negotiate' with the Kurds, separately from the Syrian rebels.¹¹ But no-one should be under any illusion that any formal recognition of 'Kurdish autonomy' by the Assad regime would be honoured any more than those made by Saddam Hussein with the representatives of the Kurdish minority in Iraq; and they generally ended with massacres.

The PYD's opportunism in this regard, however, is not the only reason for the divisions between Kurdish and Arab popular forces in Syria. The official Syrian opposition in exile (both the Syrian National Council and later the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces) has abjectly failed to make any explicit recognition of Kurdish national rights in a post-Assad Syria, while many of its components quite explicitly oppose the very idea.

In addition, many Syrian Kurds believe that the FSA in northern Syria depends on Turkish support and acts as a tool of Erdogan's anti-Kurdish policy. And there is also the spontaneous hostility towards Islamists of a Kurdish population that is generally more secular than the surrounding rural and small town Arab population.

Although the eruption of IS as a threat to the PYD and Rojava, as well as to the FSA and its allies, has pushed both towards a rough and ready alliance, this has been strained by allegations of ethnic cleansing made against Kurdish forces as they push west to link together Syria's three Kurdish-majority regions.^{12,13,14} This advance has taken them through regions with a majority-Arab population and, while the PYD and even some of its Arab allies have rejected these accusations,^{15,16} it seems likely that there has been a policy of 'collective punishment' of civilian populations accused of having supported IS.¹⁷

This has apparently even been admitted by some YPG representatives, who have acknowledged that this was wrong and must not be repeated.

The 'secular' south and the 'Islamist' north

In the south of Syria, there have been continued gains against both Assad and IS by the Southern Front,18 currently engaged in the liberation of Daraa, the birthplace of the revolution in March 2011. Its ultimate objective is to march on Damascus and dislodge the Assad regime from the country's capital city, leaving only the Alawite-populated strongholds inland from the coastal region around Latakia in the regime's possession.

The Southern Front is an alliance of the FSA with various forces, most of them secular but including some Islamists. And in this instance, the secular forces have been strong enough to exclude from its ranks al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, the notorious Jabhat an-Nusra.

Jabhat an-Nusra is an extremely unstable Salafist-led formation from which many of IS's Syrian fighters originally emerged, when they split from Jabhat an-Nusra's ranks, encouraged by the entry into Syria of IS's core component, the former Iraqi al-Qaeda affiliate, then known as the Islamic State of Iraq.

While IS and Jabhat an-Nusra have maintained a fierce rivalry ever since, especially following Jabhat an-Nusra's participation in the attempts by the FSA and the Islamic Front to eliminate IS in Syria from January 2014 onwards, Jabhat an-Nusra has also been prone to seeing its fighters defect to its now better-resourced and more strongly entrenched rival, from which moreover it is ideologically indistinguishable.

The real difference between Jabhat an-Nusra and IS is a strategic one that stems from their different national origins. IS has from the outset had the conscious objective of building a state, as its predecessors in Iraq tried to during their struggle against the US occupation of their country. It either excludes other forces from the regions under its control, or forcibly integrates them into its own forces, where they are close enough ideologically that they can be won over to it.

Jabhat an-Nusra, by contrast, operates as a rebel faction within a coalition of rebel factions (albeit factions whose toleration of it is wearing extremely thin), in keeping with the general feature of the Syrian armed opposition to date: the absence of any central authority capable of subsuming all the armed factions under its own control.

And the wisdom of Jabhat an-Nusra's exclusion in the south is confirmed by the experience further north where, after playing a minor role in the liberation of Idlib in late March 2015,19 Jabhat an-Nusra proceeded to massacre some 20 Druze villagers.20

This act of sectarian murder was all the more outrageous, given that the Islamist-led 'Army of Conquest' that liberated Idlib involved a broad coalition of Islamist and secular forces, including not just the FSA and the secular (and Saudi-backed) Syria Revolutionaries Front, but rebel Christian units and even some Druze defectors from the regime.21

Syrian revolutionaries in the north of the country, whether secular or Islamist, would be well advised to emulate their southern comrades' exclusion of forces whose actions can only undermine and discredit their struggle.

Secularists, Islamists, IS and the Palestinians

But then the Southern Front's hostility to Salafist Islamists is no surprise either. In contrast to the regions north and west of Aleppo, where 'Sunni versus Alawite' inter-communal fighting has certainly played a role in the war, the FSA in southern Syria has always been dominated by secular nationalists. One of its strongholds, until its fall to the regime in March 2014, following one of Assad's many worse-than-Gaza starvation sieges, was Yabroud, a town to the north of Damascus with a large Christian population. Another, Zabadani, between Damascus and Zahleh in Lebanon, was captured from the rebels by

Hezbollah in April 2014.

And recent events in the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk, south of Damascus, have reinforced the alienation of secular revolutionaries from both Jabhat an-Nusra and the Islamic Front. Yarmouk has the largest concentration of Palestinian refugees in Syria, and was once regarded as a symbol of the Palestinian armed struggle against Israel. Barely 10 kilometres from the centre of Damascus, it has since December 2012 been subjected to a starvation siege that has seen many of its residents reduced to eating stray cats, and in which 200 are reported to have died.²²

On 1 April 2015, Yarmouk, completely surrounded by regime-held territory, was invaded by IS forces, giving rise to many accusations and counter-accusations of treachery and collusion with the Assad regime. Zahran Alloush's Salafist 'Army of Islam' in particular accused Jabhat an-Nusra of having facilitated IS's entry into the camp.^{23,24}

Others have accused the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC) of Ahmed Jibril, the regime's principal enforcer within Syria's overwhelmingly pro-revolution Palestinian minority, of allowing IS into the camp in order to attack the Syrian and Palestinian rebel forces based there, a tactical ploy that pro-regime forces have also been accused of deploying elsewhere.²⁵

What is certainly true is that Jabhat an-Nusra declared its 'neutrality' in the clashes between IS and the FSA in Yarmouk, while the regime took advantage of the situation to drop 13 barrel bombs on the camp.

The regime also tried to draw the Fatah-led PLO into giving it an official mandate to 'liberate' the camp, while giving the PFLP-GC and other pro-regime Palestinian formations carte blanche to try to regain control of an iconic Palestinian neighbourhood from which they had been largely excluded for the last three years, something in which they were not even remotely successful.

After five weeks, IS forces eventually were driven out of the camp, not by the regime but by the rebels, with the assistance of the pro-Hamas and anti-Assad Palestinian militia Aknaf Bait al-Maqdis. By then, most of Jabhat an-Nusra's fighters in the camp had switched from 'neutrality' to outright defection to IS.

And while the Army of Islam, one of the two main components of the Islamic Front, also fought against IS, the Islamic Front's other main component, Ahrar ash-Sham (the 'Free Men of the Levant') like Jabhat an-Nusra declared its neutrality. And this, in turn, reflects extremely badly on the Islamic Front's whole project.

The Islamic Front

The Islamic Front was formed in November 2013 with Saudi encouragement, as a 'mainstream' Salafist counterweight to both IS and Jabhat An-Nusra. Its political basis was one that rejected the takfiri approach to fellow Muslims, while still advocating an Islamic state to replace the Assad regime, albeit one with a 'consultative' rather than 'representative' model of democracy.

And its selling point to the still sizeable secular component of the anti-Assad camp was that it would act as a buffer between the secular revolutionaries and the 'extremist' Salafist factions, by drawing fighters, resources and popular support away from them, and by siding with the rest of the anti-Assad camp against them.

In this, the Islamic Front's formation is the product of two very important factors. The first is that the vast majority of both secular and Islamist forces do not want a breach within the anti-Assad camp to open up along religious versus secular lines. This has forced the Islamist components, whatever their other wrongdoings, to act to discipline those of their allies whose actions might make such a breach inevitable.

The other factor has been the attempts of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to put together a 'moderate opposition' that they can present to the Western powers as a future recipient of political and material support, a bid that has so far failed to convince the USA and its allies. The Syria Revolutionaries Front was formed for much the same reason, as a 'secular' counterpart to the Islamic Front.

Both accordingly were major components of the 'revolution within the revolution' against IS that began in January 2014, involving a coalition of rebel forces so broad that even Jabhat an-Nusra was intimidated into joining it.²⁶ Significantly, the IS provocations that preceded this major turn against it included attacks on both 'secularist' and 'Islamist' targets: namely, IS's arrest of world-famous cartoonist Raed Fares in an attempt to close down his media centre in Kafr Nabl²⁷ and its murder of Ahrar ash-Sham commander and physician Hussein al-Suleiman ('Abu Rayyan').²⁸

Even so, there is little love lost between the Islamic Front and the secular forces, especially after the Yarmouk events. Army of Islam leader Zahran Alloush may have rowed back a little from his opposition to 'democracy' and his open sectarianism against Alawites, now that he is trying to present an acceptable face to Turkey and to the Western allies of his Arab Gulf sponsors.²⁹ But many still hold him responsible for the December 2013 disappearance of secularist human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, her husband and two of their colleagues in Alloush's stronghold of Douma in the northern Damascus suburbs.

And in the same month, only shortly before its anti-IS offensive, the Army of Islam took part alongside Jabhat an-Nusra in a massacre of dozens of Alawite, Christian and Druze civilians in the town of Adra, in the Douma district. That Alloush has not engaged in clashes with the Kurds, mainly because the Army of Islam's base is in the south of the country, while its partner Ahrar-ash-Sham is based in Aleppo, Idlib and the north.

Unlike the increasingly isolated and now barely tolerated Jabhat an-Nusra, and unlike IS, whose presence in Syria almost has the character of an Iraqi occupation, the Islamic Front does have a genuinely popular base of support. However, it cannot be long before people come to realise that any thoroughgoing 'revolution within the revolution' will sooner or later have to extend also to a confrontation with the Islamic Front, especially once the common threat of Assad and IS starts to recede.

The grindingly slow death of the Assad regime

One should never forget that IS are not the only terrorists in Syria, nor even the most prolific. The 'secular' totalitarian Assad regime is responsible for easily 10 or 20 times the numbers of people killed, wounded or displaced as its takfiri-jihadist mirror-image is. And Bashar al-Assad still clings to power in an almost continuous swathe of the country, stretching from Damascus through Homs and Hama to the outskirts of Aleppo, and from there to the coast at Latakia and the Russian naval base at Tartous.

Assad is locked into a civil war which his regime ultimately cannot win, at least not by military means alone. Iran and Russia provide him with funds and resources, while the Lebanese Shi'ite movement, Hezbollah, supply him with fighters.^{30,31} The regime has even had to make up for the shortage of Syrians willing to continue fighting and dying for it by drawing on the support of Shi'ite sectarian militias from Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan.³²

Indeed, this is the Assad regime's real Achilles heel – not a shortage of weapons, but a shortage of manpower. With the machinery of conscription having broken down, the regime has been forced to use press-gang methods to keep its army together, prompting a flight from the country of young men keen to avoid military service, including many members of Syrian minorities that are generally assumed to be 'pro-regime' (primarily Christians and Druze) to Lebanon and elsewhere.

In any case, both the regime and its allies on the ground have little faith in the army's loyalty, with Hezbollah in particular far more confident about fighting alongside the newly-created volunteer National Defence Forces than alongside demoralised army units prone to defection or desertion.

The fact that the National Defence Forces have been recruited overwhelmingly, although not quite exclusively from the Alawite minority represents a continuation of the overall trend, that of an extreme narrowing and erosion of the regime's base of support.

And this in turn has imposed huge sacrifices on the Alawites, and creates with it the risk that one day, their losses will become so extreme that the regime's last remaining base of reliable mass support will look to a future without Assad and without the regime, as the only obvious alternative to their own complete annihilation. It has also greatly strengthened the role of Iran as the real power behind Assad, creating resentments that manifest themselves even within the regime's own camp.³³

Amongst the Druze, also, there are signs that their communal leaders are moving away from a position of 'neutrality', or even of soft support for the regime, and towards open opposition.³⁴

The unarmed mass protests that marked the opening phase of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 may have failed to break the army open in the way that their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt did, for reasons that are peculiar to Syria's class and ethno-sectarian structure. But they, and the civil war that Assad imposed on the country after them have created a continuous haemorrhage from the available pool of forces willing to tie their future to the regime's continued existence.

This leaves Assad fighting a war of attrition against the Syrian rebels that shows no sign of coming to an end, despite his regime's superior firepower, and despite its continued devastation of rebel-held areas through aerial bombardment and starvation sieges.

Western intervention ? but who is it aimed at?

Indeed, notwithstanding the September 2013 agreement between US State Secretary John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to secure the Assad regime's destruction of its stockpile of chemical weapons, following the regime's poison gas attacks on the rebel-held Damascus suburbs in August 2013, it is well documented that Assad has continued to use all manner of chemical weapons against civilians.^{35,36}

This was supposedly one of Obama's 'red lines' which, if crossed, would result in a US-led intervention against Assad. In the event, the USA, Britain and their allies baulked. This was not just as a result of Russia's support for the Assad regime, or of entirely justified domestic opposition to involvement in yet another Middle East war following the 2003-10 debacle in Iraq. It also reflected the unease of many in US and British military and security circles at the prospect of a military intervention without clear goals, and without clear allies.

Whatever the slanders of Assad's apologists, the fact is that the Syrian rebels, far from being in the pockets of the Western imperialist powers, represented popular forces that their self-styled Western 'allies' understood perfectly well would not easily submit to their control. Indeed, the overall picture has always been much more complex than the one-dimensional geopolitics that Assad's conspiracy theory-minded apologists on the international left and beyond have generally accepted.

For many of them, the Syrian revolution itself was always an imperialist conspiracy against an anti-imperialist 'resistance regime';³⁷ IS was the creation of the Israeli Mossad and the CIA; and the Western powers have been gunning for Assad and plotting his overthrow all along, held back only by the new 'multi-

polar order? in world politics, represented by the rise of Russian and Chinese imperialism.

In fact, Russia's opposition to a direct Western military intervention in Syria let the Western powers off the hook, allowing them to back away even from the "unbelievably small, limited kind of effort" that John Kerry spoke of during a press conference in London with the UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, on 9 September 2013.

Kerry's objective, as he explained at the time, was not "going to war" but "to hold Bashar Assad accountable without engaging in troops on the ground or any other prolonged kind of effort in a very limited, very targeted, very short-term effort that degrades his capacity to deliver chemical weapons without assuming responsibility for Syria's civil war".³⁸

The British and US governments would justify their hesitation with the self-fulfilling prophecy that the Syrian rebels had not sufficiently distanced themselves from the "extremists" in their own ranks, and that this made their involvement in any anti-Assad intervention untenable.³⁹

Isolation leads to radicalisation

It is no accident that the following twelve months saw a major radicalisation of the anti-Assad forces. The very "extremists" who had served as the Western powers' pretext for cooperating with Russian imperialism's temporary preservation of the Assad regime gained ground on the back of a mass realisation by anti-Assad Syrians that little or no help would be forthcoming from the outside world.

When direct US intervention in the region finally did come, it was in response to the threat posed by IS's advance into Iraq and its capture of Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city. This was a threat both to the major oil reserves in Iraq's Kurdish region, and to the continued existence of the post-US occupation Iraqi state, a key ally of the Assad regime and, like it, also a client state of Iran.

US imperialism, having been hesitant about intervening in Syria only a year earlier, now responded quickly, authorising the deployment of US forces in Iraq on 15 June and airstrikes on 7 August 2014.⁴⁰ Here, the Western powers could count not only on Russia's lack of opposition, but on its whole-hearted support, now that IS had become a threat to Moscow's Syrian and Iranian clients alike.

Perversely, this "convergence" between Russian and US imperialist policy in Syria and Iraq, which Lavrov and Russian President Vladimir Putin would see as having been a vindication of their stated policy of promoting a "negotiated settlement" with the Assad regime, would be deepened by the US and EU backed overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 (and the Ukrainian civil war that followed it), as US imperialism discovered a point of pressure on Russia to limit its global influence that was much more uncomfortably close to home for Putin than Syria was.

This "convergence" has had features that Syria's revolutionaries are all too familiar with, but that receive little attention from the outside world. The US-led intervention in Syria has involved attacks not only on IS, but other enemies of the Syrian regime as well. Groups such as Jabhat an-Nusra and the Islamic Front in Idlib, where there is no IS presence at all, have been amongst the targets of the US-led bombing campaign.^{41,42,43}

Notwithstanding the reactionary politics of both Jabhat an-Nusra and the Islamic Front, the attack on the latter, at the very least, was an attack on a force that enjoys genuine popular support. That is enough for the US to categorise them as "extremists", whose wings must be clipped the better to facilitate any future inter-imperialist deal for Syria, over the heads of the Syrian people.

These airstrikes and special forces missions went alongside some limited material and logistical support

for the Kurdish YPG and occasional talk of finding some suitably 'moderate' Syrian rebels to arm. However, the USA's difficulty in finding these 'moderate rebels' is partly a function of the fact that their 'moderation' is to be measured by their willingness to agree to fight exclusively against IS, and not against the Assad regime.⁴⁴

This strategy is primarily designed to contain IS without changing the overall balance of forces in a way that might pose too much of a threat to the Assad regime, something that would undermine Russia's present acceptance of the US-led intervention.

And the maintenance of a stalemate between IS, the Kurds, the Syrian rebels and the Assad regime suits sections of the US ruling class perfectly well. Presenting IS as a mortal threat to Western civilisation and 'democratic values' in the region provides a useful distraction for the US public from ongoing social and economic problems at home.

Recent developments in Turkey have further complicated matters in Syria and indeed the whole region. However contradictory it may appear, it will not strategically alter the US war aims.

Following the massacre of 32 socialist youth in the Turkish city of Suruç by an Islamic State suicide bomber on 20 July 2015, the Turkish Government joined the US 'coalition of the willing' to fight IS. The reality, however, is rather different.

In fact it launched a major round up by security forces in Ankara, Izmir, Istanbul and other centres. Ostensibly targeted at IS sympathisers, amongst the more than 1,000 arrested are many leftists and Kurdish militants. Militant protests and their violent repression ensued.

On 24 July, Turkish F-16 jets started bombing targets inside Syria for the first time, while the tanks and artillery of its Fifth Armoured Brigade shelled IS militants across the border. But the airstrikes also targeted PKK militants in northern Iraq. Indeed it seems they are aimed more at Kurdish fighters, and not just in Iraq but also in northern Syria, hitting the Rojava PYG and even FSA units working with them.

There are reports that Turkish troops will eventually cross the border in force and occupy a piece of territory, claiming it will be a safe haven for Syrian refugees, huge numbers of whom have fled to Turkey. However it seems its strategic purpose is to prevent the link up of the Kurdish-held areas on the western end of the Syrian border with those on the east.

Were the PYG to clear this area of IS it would create a contiguous Kurdish autonomous region in Syria similar to the one in Iraq and would in turn have an impact on the 20 per cent Kurdish population in Turkey itself.

The bombings have finally ruptured the ceasefire and attempted peace process between the Kurds in Turkey and the AKP government. It has also been suggested that Erdogan's aim is to find a pretext to ban the People's Democratic Party (HDP) which won 13.12 per cent in the June general election and has 80 members of parliament. The HDP success in uniting Kurds and left wing Turks denied Erdogan and the AKP an absolute majority in the Turkish parliament. Banning it could be the basis for restoring the AKP's parliamentary majority in a snap election.

Erdogan has won warm US approval by finally allowing them to use Incirlik Air Base for their attacks on IS for the first time. The US has called this 'a game changer' in their 'war against ISIL'.

The contradiction this imports into their war strategy is that, thus far, the Kurds in Iraq and Syria have been the only fighting force that has been able to inflict serious defeats on IS. The US in pursuit of making their bombing easier and more effective might have to sacrifice the only 'boots on the ground' that they have.

The Turkish army has made it plain that they do not intend to provide such 'on the ground' support for their Nato ally beyond their intervention on the border.

Nevertheless Turkey's direct involvement in Syria clearly marks the country's further advance as a regional player, and one far from being under US control.

The revolution rises like a phoenix from the ashes

The fact that, despite four and a half years of struggle, Syrian revolutionaries are still fighting Bashar al-Assad is as much a testament to their resolve, and to their popular support, as it is to the utter absence of any forces assisting them for much of that time.

However, despite the Western powers' repeated betrayals of their lofty promises, there are still some voices within the Syrian opposition calling for a change in US imperialist policy. They want either the implementation of a 'no-fly zone' or the extension of the US-led intervention against IS to a commitment to overthrow the Assad regime.

Against this, we must insist that any Western imperialist intervention will be aimed at securing their own interests, not those of the Syrian people's revolution or of the peoples of the region as a whole. Indeed, the sorry situation of the region as a whole is primarily a result of repeated imperialist interference in, and domination of the region over the course of the last century.

Instead of looking to the imperialists, we must actively support those fighting for their democratic rights, and indeed for their lives: that is, the Kurdish people's struggle for national self-determination, and the struggle of the Syrian people as a whole to overthrow their ossified, decades-old Baathist dictatorship. We can do this in part by promoting practical solidarity. The millions-strong labour movement in the West should demand and provide every form of material aid needed by the forces on the ground.

This should be done not as a matter of 'charity', but through a consciously political campaign seeking to win the labour movement to a position of solidarity with the Syrian people, both against IS and against the Assad regime, and also of opposition to imperialist intervention.

However, if our governments, for whatever self-interested reasons of their own, offer these same forces any material assistance, then our job should be to demand that this aid is 'without strings', that it should not be attached to any conditions, military or political, that limit the freedom of action of the insurgent Syrian Arab and Kurdish people.

And as a matter of the most extreme urgency, we should denounce the racist immigration controls that prevent Syrian refugees from being able to claim asylum legally in the West, and that leave thousands risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean in flimsy boats for which they have paid a fortune to human traffickers in order to escape a living hell at home.⁴⁵

The human cost of the war

The suffering caused by the Syrian civil war has been staggering. Its most basic statistic, the number of deaths, is estimated by the United Nations (up to 15 January 2015) as 220,000.⁴⁶ Other sources, like the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, say the figure could be as high as 330,000.^{47,48}

People are struggling for food and water supplies amongst shattered houses, hospitals, schools, universities and broken infrastructure. The fruits of many decades of economic and social development have been obliterated. Scientists in the US and in China have estimated that, as monitored by space satellite photography, 83 per cent of Syria's electric lighting has gone out, plunging cities like Aleppo into

near total darkness.^{49,50}

Religious and ethnic communities that have lived in the region for centuries have been driven from their homes. Inter-communal hatreds have been fanned to white heat, something for which the regime bears the main responsibility. Cultural treasures have been destroyed.

And within Syria, at least 7.6 million refugees have been displaced and their homes looted, as of July 2015, according to the Internally Displaced Monitoring Centre.⁵¹ No wonder then that huge numbers of desperate people have fled the country altogether.

Before the war, Syria was a country of 23 million people. There are now close on 4 million refugees who have fled the country. This includes 2.2 million Syrians registered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.⁵²

There are 132,000 in Egypt, 249,000 in Iraq, 629,000 in Jordan and 1.1 million in Lebanon, while 1.8 million are registered in Turkey and a further 24,000 in North Africa.⁵³ In addition to the countries surrounding Syria, 270,000 have managed to reach Europe via the Mediterranean or the Balkans. The UNHCR reports it has received less than a quarter of the \$5.5 billion (£3.6 billion) promised, which it needs to help Syrian refugees and the countries hosting them.⁵⁴

Such a degree of dislocation and dispersal makes it clear why the Syrian revolution has not progressed according to the textbooks of some so-called revolutionaries, and also why the forces of civil society and their organisations have been compressed and cramped into bodies waging a war.

Factories and workshops closed and laid off their workers. And the official trade unions, tied hand and foot to the Baathist regime, were unable or unwilling to defend them or chart any independent course of action. It explains too why the Syrian working class has not been able to play any independent role beyond local and episodic instances. Nevertheless, in spite of all this, the struggle for freedom and democracy goes on, albeit under the harshest conditions and against a range of different counterrevolutionary forces.

The most obvious of these is the regime itself. It has shown itself willing to destroy its own people to preserve its luxury and privilege. But it is sawing through the bough on which it sits. Then there are the takfiri jihadists, headed by IS, whose caliphate would be as bad as the regime. Outside of the country, big regional powers like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and smaller ones like Hezbollah, intervene by direct military action and/or by supplying money and weapons to their favoured clients.

And Israel's need for 'security', once provided to it by a Baathist regime that didn't fire a shot in anger over the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights for decades, has been a major factor in the Western powers' decision to preserve a deadly stalemate.^{55,56,57,58}

Rival imperialisms clash in Syria

Behind all these forces stand the two major imperialist powers; Russia and the US, now once more openly Cold War rivals. The Assad family and the Baathist regime are Russian assets inherited from the USSR, and Moscow did much to ensure that they survived the first assault of the revolution. Putin's regime also has an independent stake in 'the War on Terror'; Russia's brutal war of conquest and continued occupation in Chechnya means that Chechen Islamist fighters are to be found on any front where they can hit back at Russia's allies or interests.

Other, more tangible, Russian assets in Syria include the port of Tartous, open to Russian warships and the only port on the Mediterranean from which Russia can project its power as a regional player. Russia

has supplied the Assad regime with huge amounts of weapons and surveillance technology, drones, etc., as well as data from its satellites.⁵⁹

Then there are Russia's economic investments. In 2005, Russia simply wrote off some 70 per cent of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt.⁶⁰ Moscow estimates that Russian investments in Syria stood at \$19.4 billion in 2009, involving infrastructure, energy and tourism, nuclear power and oil and gas exploration.⁶¹ As a valued ally of Iran, Syria is a vital part of Russia's informal 'empire'. Without Putin's support, the Assad regime would undoubtedly have collapsed much sooner.

Russia's interventions on Assad's side have been matched, albeit far more cautiously, by those of the US, which has up until now at least carefully avoided tipping the strategic balance decisively against Assad. Despite a few neoconservative blowhards in the White House, Obama is very wary of being drawn into an overt 'boots on the ground' intervention in Syria. And besides which, neocons like Victoria Nuland and Robert Kagan have their hands full right now with the absolute mess they have created in Ukraine.

All the same, the CIA did covertly aid some Syrian rebels early on in the civil war. At first, it only supplied some suitably 'moderate' rebels with 'non-lethal aid', claiming that any weapons supplied might fall into the wrong hands.^{62,63} This has become something of a joke since the US-trained Iraqi army's rout resulted in a huge US arsenal, including tanks and armoured vehicles, falling to IS in Mosul.

Subsequently, US aid to the rebels expanded to include training, cash and intelligence to its preferred commanders in the FSA. In 2013, it began giving them low-grade weaponry, but held off from supplying surface-to-air missiles that could have enabled the rebels to resist the regime's helicopters and jets which still command the skies.⁶⁴

In September 2014, after IS's stunning victories and eruption into Syria, Obama blustered that the US would now 'degrade and ultimately destroy' IS.⁶⁵ And the House of Representatives formally authorised him to train and equip Syrian rebels against IS.⁶⁶

By then, aid was also being provided to some Islamist forces judged to be firm opponents of IS. What the US regards as its successful experiment in Kobane has persuaded Obama to arm and coordinate operationally with other Syrian opposition groups beyond the Kurdish YPG, giving them technical aids equipped with radio and Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment to call in airstrikes.⁶⁷

They also plan to send 400 troops, and hundreds more support staff, to neighbouring countries to train 5,000 anti-Assad fighters a year for the next three years. The UK's David Cameron, more warlike (from the sidelines) until his ardour was suddenly cooled on 29 August 2013 by a House of Commons vote forbidding intervention, has confirmed the despatch of 75 military instructors to train Syrian opposition forces. Other countries taking part in the anti-IS campaign include Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.^{68,69}

The USA, as we have seen, was only drawn into Syria in the form of air attacks on IS targets because of the situation in Iraq and the fact that IS had established a safe base in Syria. In the east of Syria, there are reports that US Special Forces have attacked an IS-held stronghold close to the oil facilities at al-Omar in Deir ez-Zor province, near Iraq's majority-Sunni (and largely IS-held) Anbar province.⁷⁰

The target of the raid, alleged 'IS oil chief' Abu Sayyaf, was killed and his wife captured on 17 May,⁷¹ shortly before IS's own capture of nearby Palmyra from the Assad regime on 20 May. Palmyra, known to the outside world as a tourist resort famous for its archaeological treasures, was also notorious in Syria for decades as the location of the regime's major prison complex.

In March this year, there was even talk of an alliance between the hitherto bitter rivals, Turkish President Erdogan and the Saudi and Qatari monarchs, to intervene militarily in Syria not only to fight IS but to speed up Assad's downfall.^{72,73} Whatever the tactical advantages this might appear to bring to the secular and democratic forces, it would plainly presage a reactionary outcome, since it would need US approval, and would probably aim to preserve the Baathist state apparatus intact while ousting the Assad clan and its immediately surrounding entourage.

This would inevitably mean violently repressing all genuine revolutionary and democratic forces as 'agents of disorder'.

Conclusion

The progressive democratic forces, Arab and Kurdish alike, fighting both the Assad regime and the equally counterrevolutionary IS, still deserve our full support. The Syrian revolution is not yet dead, disfigured and bloodied though it may be. It still exists in the relatively democratic structures in Rojava, in the local councils and committees in the southern and northern liberated zones, and in the courageous militias and units defending them.

True, the political leaderships, the PYD as well as the FSA and the Syrian opposition exiles, have made unprincipled concessions to US imperialism and its regional allies, including calls for direct US intervention which, if it occurred, would sabotage any potential for revolutionary gains, democratic let alone socialist.

It will only be by fighting to defeat both sets of enemies of democracy in Syria, the Assad regime and IS, and by preventing US and European imperialism from expropriating the revolution from without, that it will be possible to conquer wider and wider democratic spaces. Within these the revolution can continue to mobilise, building up powerful progressive forces including, above all, the Syrian working class, whose independent forces are still in an absolutely embryonic state. This will also require a political struggle by revolutionary socialists against the present leaderships of the resistance.

When the dictatorship finally disintegrates, the admittedly small forces of the revolutionary left will have to make it their priority to assist this working class to form its own independent class organisations – workers' councils and militant trade unions, in alliance with all the dispossessed and displaced strata of the population. It will have to do all in its power to ensure that the caste of exiled bourgeois politicians, the elements of the old regime and the stooges of Turkey or the Arab Gulf states do not usurp power from the people under a thin veneer of democracy.

And their aim must be for the workers, peasants, small producers and the urban intelligentsia to take power and build a new society from the ashes of this brutal war, and with it a common future for all of Syria's people.

Endnotes

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