



# Rival Imperialisms take sides in the Syrian revolution

Dave Stockton Fri, 25/11/2011 - 12:38

Dave Stockton

The revolution in Syria refuses to be crushed, and with reports of more soldiers defecting, Dave Stockton examines where things could go next

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad faces haemorrhaging international support and increasing numbers of defectors from his own security forces; 220,000 strong before the uprising, now according to some estimates down to 195,000.

Eight months of repression - which according to UN estimates has left 3,500 dead and unknown numbers injured, detained and tortured - the regime has failed to subdue the revolution.

After months of near silence from most of the Arab states the final termination of the war in Libya and the increasing number of attacks by the newly formed Free Syrian Army guerrillas (FSA) seems to have concentrated their minds, most deciding it was now time to intervene in the Syrian crisis.

On November 17 the 22-member Arab League suspended Damascus from membership giving the regime three days to halt what it finally called Assad's "bloody repression" or risk economic sanctions.

Of course most of the member states of the Arab League can make few claims to a flourishing democracy or respect for human rights. The League's resolution demanded the sending of 500 observers to Damascus to monitor the regime's compliance. Assad has defiantly rejected the call, so a process of sanctions will probably now go ahead.

Over the past six months Turkey has given shelter to large numbers of Syrians fleeing repression in the north of the country and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been sharply critical of the failure of the Arab states to condemn the repression, saying that "the lack of reaction to massacres in Syria was causing irreparable wounds in the conscience of humanity."

However Erdogan himself, fresh from a military incursion into northern Iraq to hit at the Kurdish guerrillas of the PKK, is hardly motivated by democratic idealism. His 'moderate Islamist' government is busy trying to carve out a greater sphere of influence in the Middle East as well as close off support for the Kurdish fighters.

## Western Imperialism considers intervention

The Western powers have also been heavily criticising Assad for months. In mid-August US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton finally called on Assad to "step aside." The EU and US have imposed sanctions on leading members of the regime. Their faux indignation at its human rights violations is a monstrous piece of hypocrisy when, until recently, they used states like Syria and Mubarak's Egypt as a destination for the "extraordinary rendition" of some 3000 prisoners of the "war on terrorism." They knew full well that they would be obligingly tortured by the Mukh-bar?t (secret police) and the results forwarded to the CIA.

France, as the former colonial power in Syria and Lebanon, has said it is time for international bodies to take action against Syria's government. Germany, Britain and France have submitted a UN General Assembly resolution that would condemn Syria's human rights violations. British Foreign Secretary, William Hague is meeting members of the Syrian opposition in London, doubtless to discuss the upping of pressure on Assad and to find reliable pro-Western elements like the ones they helped come to the fore in Libya.

The EU states indeed they have considerable economic leverage if they wish to use it. Some 95 per cent of Syria's oil exports are to EU countries and a large part of its imports come from there too. Though Syria is not primarily an oil rentier state, like Libya, or the Gulf states, its oil sales for 2010 generated \$3.2 billion; 25.1 per cent of state revenue.

The USA though it too would like to see the fall of the Assad regime, fears actions which would destabilise the region around Israel. A new regime has to be at least as harmless as the Assads, father and son, were to the US's Zionist attack dog. Of course a new regime that would end support for Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinians and cut its links with Iran would be even better. But as events in Egypt show this is unlikely.

So at the moment it seems unwilling to take military action. Leon Panetta, the CIA chief, has ruled a out Nato no-fly zone over Syria. Meanwhile the Israelis have let it be known that they fear the downfall of Assad for fear of getting something worse as a result of revolution - the same attitude they have showed throughout the 'Arab Spring.' For the Zionists it is a case of better the devil you know.

The idea that the whole uprising in Syria is a plot by the imperialist to bring down an anti- imperialist regime, as some claim, is ridiculous. Worse it is a pretext for political support of tyranny and would moreover push the Syrian democratic movement precisely in the direction of the USA and the 'heroes' of the intervention in Libya, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron.

### **Assad's regional and imperialist supporters**

The Syrian regime still has a few supporters in the Arab World? for example many in the Palestinian movement who mistakenly see Syria, along with Iran, as their last ally against Zionism. In fact the domination of allies and pensioners of the Damascus regime in Gaza and the West Bank are part responsible for the failure of the Arab Spring to develop there in the form of a new Intifada. Breaking free from the malign influence of the Islamists and Stalinists who place all their hopes on regimes in Syria, Lebanon, Iran and even to some extent Iraq, is the key to recreating the Palestinian movement as an autonomous revolutionary expression of the Arab revolution.

But the crucial supporters of the Ba'athist totalitarian dictatorship remain Russia and China. In all likelihood they will ? as in Libya ? only abandon it when it is disintegrating.

One of the most remarkable changes that this historic crisis of globalised capitalism has brought into the light of day is that imperialism is not a single entity. Throughout the Cold War and the 1990s Marxists often just talked of Imperialism, meaning the USA and its subaltern powers in Western Europe, plus Japan in the Far East. So strong was the USA's hegemony that only on secondary matters or in peripheral regions was this lazy speech a hindrance to understanding world geopolitics. Today it can only confuse analysis and political orientation for revolutionaries.

The decline of the USA's global hegemony and the rise of a dynamic capitalist China and a re-assertive Russia have increased what can only be described as inter-imperialist rivalries. In October they both vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that threatened sanctions against Syria. Russia has echoed the propaganda line from Damascus. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated;

"It is not a secret that along with the peaceful demonstrators, whose strivings and demands we support, there is more and more participation from groups of armed people who have an entirely different agenda from reform and democracy in Syria". He went on; "Their agenda concerns ethnic and tribal interests, and these people have received and are continuing to receive weapons in growing amounts from neighbouring countries, and they don't particularly hide it."

Nor does Russia bother to hide the fact that it is with Russian artillery and tanks, sniper rifles and ammunition that Assad's forces are killing largely unarmed civilians. A director-general of the Russian Military Cooperation Service, Viatcheslav Djirkaln, said recently that there would be "no restrictions at all on arms deliveries to Syria.

So much for supporting the 'strivings and demands' of Syrian democrats.

Certainly Russia has little sympathy for 'ethnic and tribal' peoples, in fact they have a visceral sympathy for their dictatorial oppressors. Two bloody wars in Chechnya and the first 'war against terrorism' in Russia itself helped this reactionary regime to stabilise itself. The inheritance of a highly industrialised country, a massive military with a nuclear capacity, as well as the Russian Federation's vast natural resources (oil, gas, valuable minerals, etc.) and the central Asian independent states as semi-colonies - enabled it to join the select club of imperialist powers after the economic crash of 1991.

As a new (or renewed) imperialism, Russia seeks to keep its assets in the world's most oil-rich and geo-strategic region. In 2006 Russia cancelled three quarters of Syria's debt to it (\$9.6 billion), and remains its main arms dealer, intending to develop and enlarge its naval base to strengthen its naval presence in the Mediterranean. The Syrian port of Tartus is now the only one in the Mediterranean which is open on a 24-hour basis to the Russian navy. Without it every Russian warship would have to transit the Turkish Straits to Odessa for provisioning and repairs.

### **The Syrian Resistance**

The crumbling of sections of the Syrian Army are a positive sign and the creation of armed defenders of the mass mobilisations that can make Assad's forces pay a price for their repression will help undermine the regime. Doubtless they have played a role in sustaining the incredibly sustained mass mobilisations.

With the attack on various targets inside the role of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has come to the fore. It claims 10-15,000 members, although experts say this is a considerable exaggeration. It has recently begun to attack top regime targets in various cities, including Damascus. On the 16 November, the air force intelligence complex on the edges of Damascus was attacked - a hugely symbolic act since the power base of Bashar's father Hafez al-Assad's, from which he seized power in 1970, was in the air force.

However daring guerrilla actions by the FSA, armed only with rockets and AK 47s will not militarily defeat the 4,000-strong battle tanks and eight armoured divisions the regime still has. But men drive tanks and the crucial deciding point is when their feeling of revulsion at the slaughter and belief in the possibility of mutiny reaches critical mass - i.e. when entire units and battalions mutiny and go over to the people. Here mass political agitation and the creation of a coordinated mass movement and general strike of the workers is critical.

Clearly the strategy of non-violence as a principle widely hailed principle of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in January/February have been exploded by the civil war situations in Libya, Yemen and Syria itself. But neither can urban guerrilla tactics be elevated into a strategy either. Many of the thousands of deserters from the army have gone over to the local resistance centres, providing as much support and protection as their weaponry allows. Mass action with armed self defence is critical as is repeated attempts to get units, battalion, and divisions, to come over to the side of the people

In fact the Syrian opposition is very fragmented and heterogeneous, with important disjunctures between the long-term exile groups, whom the French and British are courting and seeking to coalesce into a leadership in waiting, and the internal leaderships that have arisen in the various cities and towns, in combat with the regimes repressive forces.

Moreover the opposition is presently split on its attitude to foreign intervention, just as it is also split on whether to enter into a dialogue with the regime, and on the question of armed versus unarmed action. Some are calling for the western powers to establish safe zones inside Syria. This is the beginning of the slippery slope to calling for Nato air strikes (the laughably named no fly zone) on their behalf.

However Western imperialist intervention will do no good in the fight for democracy, quite the opposite. The EU and the USA - for all their high-flown words on human rights - are only concerned in the pursuit of their own economic and strategic objectives in the region. Thus they will support the creation of a reactionary regime as in Libya that will still have to be overthrown by a revolution. It is vital that leftist forces distance themselves from and oppose those who are calling for an EU/Nato military intervention.

## **The road to workers and peasants power**

So how are revolutionary socialists, anti-imperialists, anti-Zionists and sincere democrats to steer a course between the clashing imperialism?s the regional aspirants to hegemony, like Turkey or Iran, and the socially reactionary forces of political Islamism who could only inflame sectarianism and the oppression of women and the rapid curtailment of hard won democratic rights as they threaten to do in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.

The answer is twofold - putting forward an internationalist revolutionary programme whose key slogans and demands can take hold amongst the masses and winning a leading role for the working class in the revolution to overthrow the Ba?athist tyranny

It is crucial too theta in a country like Syria the objectives of the struggle insofar as they are democratic are also secular. The opposition have rejected the regimes charges that they are Sunni fundamentalist who wish to persecute, Alawis and Christians and Druze. Obviously Ba?athisms origins in secular nationalism with its high numbers from the minorities makes it vulnerable to Salafist demagogy but this is all the more reason for the resistance to continue to reject this clearly and explicitly.

The intelligentsia, students and the unemployed youth who spearheaded the uprising need to find mass support in the working class, the social force that can bring down the regime, in a general strike and mass insurrection.

As in Egypt and elsewhere the formation of factory committees and workers councils is critical to this and critical too in ensuring the post-February scenario in Tunisia and Egypt, now being repeated in Tunisia does not take place in Syria. That is that the top figures of the regime ? the Assad family- are removed but the fundamental forces of the dictatorship remain in power. As in these countries the revolution must go on without interruption to arm the people, take power into the hands of organs of power of the working people and install a workers and peasants government.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/rival-imperialisms-take-sides-syrian-revolution>