

Syria: Revolution, ?communal war? and a negotiated settlement

Marcus Halaby Mon, 03/06/2013 - 19:42

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A reply to Mark Osborn's "Grim Realities in Syria", www.workersliberty.org [1] April 16. 2013

?To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, ?We are for socialism?, and another, somewhere else and says, ?We are for imperialism?, and that will be a social revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a ?putsch?.

?Whoever expects a ?pure? social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.?

(Lenin, July 1916, ?The Discussion On Self-Determination Summed Up?)

The Alliance for Workers? Liberty (AWL), having initially welcomed the Syrian revolution, has now adopted a position that amounts to refusing to take sides in the military conflict that this revolution, and the Assad regime?s bloody war against it, has developed into.

While stating that they ?oppose the brutal war being waged against the Syrian people by the Ba?athist state?, and adding that they support ?freedom, democracy, women?s and workers? rights, and democratic rights for Syria?s national minorities? and ?the right of Kurdish self-determination, including the right of Syria?s Kurdish areas to secede?, a recent resolution of the AWL?s National Committee goes on to say that:

?We oppose all manifestations of Islamism amongst the Syrian political opposition and rebel militias. Given the fragmented and often increasingly religiously radical nature of the opposition, a victory for the opposition against the state is likely to lead to ethnic cleansing and warlordism as Syria descends into chaos and breaks apart. We specifically back democratic and working-class elements. We will avoid, in our slogans and propaganda, any idea that a victory for one or some of the currently powerful opposition militias against the Ba?athists will be a positive step forward.?

It concludes:

?As a consequence, while maintaining our right to criticise and our political independence, we will not necessarily denounce a political agreement between the Ba?athists and the rebels that avoids the collapse of Syrian society into warlordism.?

Warlordism and sectarianism

In a related polemic with the US activist Pham Binh, the AWL's Mark Osborn summarizes this position as being that:

?Given the fragmented and increasingly religiously radical nature of the opposition a victory for the rebels will lead to ethnic cleansing, chaos and warlordism; that if the opposition are able to overrun the Ba'athist state conditions (both for the welfare of ordinary Syrians and for the possibility of progressive struggle) will be made worse, and so we should avoid slogans which lead to this; as a consequence we would not necessarily denounce a deal between Ba'athists and oppositionists which we believe might avoid the collapse of Syrian society into chaos.?

Drawing an instructive analogy with the AWL's past politics on Ireland, Osborn continues:

?We had come to see the demand [for the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland] as irresponsible, not because we thought the British state had a progressive role, but because if the central part of the apparatus keeping the lid on the conflict abdicated, the way would be clear to a major escalation of inter-communal conflict. Divisions in the working class would deepen, thousands more would die, Ireland would be repartitioned. Since that would be a big step backwards, why would we choose to raise a demand that would lead to it?

?Although the British state was brutal in Northern Ireland, its withdrawal without agreement between the two antagonistic communities would make matters worse, not better. In Syria we should understand that although things are very bad (from a humanitarian point of view, and for the possibility of democracy, women's rights, etc.) they could get much, much worse. In a particular Syrian town, at a particular moment, socialists might well favour the victory of the local militia against Assad's army. But ?victory for the Syrian opposition? as a general slogan now has a real meaning that would take the struggle for freedom back, not forwards.?

Ethnic cleansing and genocide

For good measure, he goes on to cite US academic Joshua Landis, who predicted in early April on Al Jazeera that a rebel attack on Damascus would lead to the ethnic cleansing and expulsion of Syria's roughly 3 million-strong Alawite minority to their ancestral heartland inland from Syria's coast, and from there into Lebanon, where their presence would create civil war conditions with consequences similar to the Ottoman genocide of the Armenians and other Christians during the First World War.

Throwing the aspirations of Syria's Kurdish minority into the equation, Osborn concludes that:

?If the struggle develops in this way ? and it is not clear what will stop it ? Syrian society will collapse. And it will collapse in many different ways ? certainly economically and socially. It will probably also be invaded, by Turkey in the north, from Jordan (buffer zones to keep chaos away from these states are already being planned) and possibly by Israel too. This is what an opposition victory means right now, concretely.?

Later citing a UNHCR report to the effect that the conflict ?has become overtly sectarian in nature?, he argues that:

?This process should be familiar to anyone who has looked ? for example ? at the break-up of Yugoslavia. In such circumstances the reasonable, secular or cosmopolitan-minded majority are marginalised. The political pace is set by the communalists and bigots, and once begun the mass of people, feeling they have no choice, fall back to their communities for safety. Communalism is strengthened and a poisonous retreat

begins strengthening mean, narrow ethnic-sectarian and religious identity at the expense of more rational social relations.?

Having been to Bosnia in 1994 as a volunteer with one of the Workers' Aid for Bosnia convoys ? a campaign that the AWL supported ? I can recognize this pattern. It is not too far off from the pattern in neighbouring Lebanon, where a popular uprising in 1975 against sectarian Maronite rule and in support of the Palestinians degenerated within a year into a 15-year sectarian civil war. It is also very similar to the situation in Iraq following its invasion and occupation in 2003 by the United States, Britain and their various allies.

Morale, discipline and revolution

Does it apply in Syria? To answer the question ? in a way that accounts for the whole picture, in all its complexity ? it might be an idea to read Mohammed Sergie's February 2013 article ?The Interview: A Botched Mass Defection? on the Syria Deeply blog (available at bit.ly/17gtBKH). It tells the story ? one that is quite representative of the gradual haemorrhaging of Syria's conscript army ? of First Lieutenant Adnan Barazi, a junior officer who tried to organize a defection from a regime checkpoint near Maaret Alnuman in Idlib province, one of the regions in which the fighting between the regime and the rebels has been at its fiercest. The town of Idlib itself is under occupation by the regime's forces, while much of the area around it is part of the ?liberated zones? that Pham Binh refers to in his polemic.

Of course, there is a sectarian dimension to this story: Barazi's account speaks of (mainly, but not exclusively) Alawite officers leading (again mainly, but not exclusively) Sunni soldiers. As we will see later, this is not an insignificant detail. Barazi himself is a Sunni; more specifically, he is a resident of Homs of Kurdish ethnicity, whose Homs accent almost gives him away as the ringleader of a planned defection.

What is instructive however is the low morale, indeed the complete lack of motivation of the regime's army. Having been sent into the field presumably to engage with the enemy, they spend much of their time trying not to make any contact with it at all, passing on information through the civilians on whom they rely for intelligence that allows the rebels to avoid any decisive confrontations with them. The rebels, for their part, mindful of their military inferiority, and confident that all the defections from one side to another in this conflict have been in one direction only, are more than happy to engage in this game of shadow-boxing, although neither they nor the regime's army can completely avoid clashes in which potential defectors on the regime's side are killed (and Barazi's account indeed mentions a colonel who was sympathetic to the revolution who was later killed in a rebel ambush).

When five soldiers from Houla (the site of a notorious massacre of civilians by pro-regime sectarian militia) are discovered trying to mutiny, Barazi relaxes the security imposed on them as they are being transported for their trial and inevitable execution, and they are freed by a mob of apparently unarmed civilians. The evidence is that almost the entire civilian population supports the rebels; indeed, the soldiers at the checkpoint cannot even use their military vehicles to move around town, and they are reduced to forcing civilians to bring food to them by seizing their identity cards.

The officers, for their part, are just about able to detect and prevent mass defections from their unit, using the ?normal? methods of military discipline, terror, intelligence gathering and the advantages of being an organized group facing a larger but unorganized mass. But try as they might, they cannot make their men display any initiative, daring or motivation in pursuing the regime's war. Remarkably, they cannot even prohibit their men from possessing and using mobile phones to communicate with their families, with the civilian population, with the rebels and with each other ? although they do seize some soldiers' mobile phones while trying to identify the ringleader of the defection that Barazi was planning.

Does this sound much like the dynamic of communal war that Osborn refers to in citing Yugoslavia? These typically involve communally based parties and militias, more or less identified with their titular communities (even if supported only by a minority within them), battling for the control of territory and expelling the other side's civilians from the territory that they control.

To me, this account looks much more like the typical dynamic of a revolution, in which "politics" plays just as important a role as warfare in deciding the outcome of military events, and in which the agents of a dying regime watch in dismay as a gradual but inexorable breakdown of morale and discipline makes a mockery of their diminishing power.

Sectarianism and the regime's base of support

It is therefore worth stating for the record: this is not a "communal war", at least not in the ordinary sense. The regime's base of support, like that of the rebels, and like Syrian society as a whole, is majority-Sunni.

What does it consist of? Primarily it consists of the bourgeoisie and the upper middle class, in particular that part of it that has been enriched or which has at least benefitted from neo-liberalism, as well as the regime's much older mainstay in the security forces and the state bureaucracy (the former, of course, containing a large number of Alawites). To this might be added that part of the middle class which in all prolonged revolutions and civil wars is frightened by disorder and desires stability, and which therefore supports whichever side looks stronger at any given time, as well as that dwindling number of Syrians of all classes that are still taken in by the regime's propaganda and its fading Arab nationalist veneer.

This, however, is not enough. The most privileged layers of society typically do not dirty their own hands with blood, even when they are supporting a regime that is up to its neck in it. Nor do state employees, unless they are directly employed in the grim business of torture and repression. And the more dispossessed and plebeian layers of the middle class will typically only fight and die for a cause that they passionately believe in, and not for a regime whose existence they are passively resigned to.

In order to find people willing to kill and be killed in its defence – and willing to display initiative and sheer bloody-mindedness at this grim task – the Ba'athist regime has had to find some base of support in the plebeian classes. It has found it, by and large, in the young men of the rural Alawite communities of the mountainous region inland from Syria's coast, many of them still extremely poor despite five decades of an avowedly secular regime dominated by individuals and families drawn from within their own community. This layer, one might say, are fanatically if short-sightedly loyal to a regime that claims the credit for having liberated their parents and grandparents from the status of a despised minority exploited by Sunni landlords and capitalists, by redistributing the land and by providing them with agricultural credits, educational opportunities and the prospect of upward social mobility.

In fact, the Syrian regime has relied on this layer at least once before, during the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood's revolt from the late 1970s to the Hama massacre in 1982, although it later had to clip their wings by sending into exile their effective leader, Rifaat al-Assad, the brother of Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor as president, Hafez al-Assad. That war, one might add, actually was a sectarian conflict, although that fact is not immediately relevant to this debate.

It has been in order to keep the loyalty of this layer, blackmailing all of Syria's minorities in the process, that the Assad regime resorted from the outset to the trope that it is fighting against a sectarian-Islamist insurgency. In the course of this, the regime has seized upon and exaggerated every real or invented manifestation of sectarianism on the part of the Syrian opposition, occasionally conducting deliberate provocations (including, according to some accounts, "false flag" operations directed at Christians and

Alawites).

However, unlike Slobodan Milosevic, whose programme was for a Greater Serbia and not the preservation of Yugoslavia, Assad's regime cannot openly engage in communal politics without signalling to its remaining base of support in the country's Sunni majority that their services are no longer required, that its war is in fact being conducted without and against them, rather than with their (however passive and conditional) support.

It is therefore obliged to arm the Alawite rural poor, incite them against their Sunni neighbours, and turn a blind eye to the inevitably murderous results, while maintaining the official line that it is a secular regime, committed to 'Arab unity' (across state borders, as well as across sects), 'resistance' (to Israel and imperialism) and a form of (long since neo-liberalised) 'socialism'.

This is a dangerous strategy, which if pursued through to its logical conclusion might actually bring about the downfall of the regime and the physical division of the country. But this 'Samson option', threatening to bring the entire world crashing down on their own heads and everyone else's, is precisely the behaviour one should expect from a vicious dictatorship in its death throes.

Alongside this layer, the regime's army prefers to do the worst of its destruction from afar, shelling towns, villages and whole cities and bombing them from the air, and using only its most reliable regular units for the sort of close fighting where the morale and loyalties of its men are absolutely essential.

The Alawite officer corps and the regime's 'resilience'

Even this, however, does not explain one of the most apparently startling features of the revolution: why has the army not cracked open under the pressure of a sustained popular revolt? Why has it merely haemorrhaged, with a constant flow of low, middle and senior-ranking defectors demonstrating the regime's mortal wounds to the Syrian people and the world at large, but without actually paralyzing its ability to continue to wage war on its own population?

In answering this question (of the Ba'athist regime's apparent 'resilience?'), Edinburgh-based academic Thomas Pierret says the following in an exchange with the Lebanese blogger and academic As'ad AbuKhalil (a pro-Hizbullah California-based Arab nationalist who shares much of the AWL's current view of events in Syria):

'The only independent variable you need to understand the resilience of the Syrian regime is the kin-based and sectarian (Alawite) nature of its military. All other purported factors are in fact dependent variables.

'The kin-based/sectarian nature of the military is what allows the regime to be not merely 'repressive?', but to be able to wage a full-fledged war against its own population. Not against a neighbouring state, an occupied people or a separatist minority, but against the majority of the population, including the inhabitants of the metropolitan area (i.e. Damascus and its suburbs). There are very few of such cases in modern history. Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi are the closest examples in the region, but the West proved much less tolerant with them.

'The regime's resilience is in no way a reflection of its legitimacy: on the contrary, the legitimacy of this regime is inversely proportional to the level of violence it needs to use to ensure its survival; in other words, this is a highly illegitimate regime in the eyes of most Syrians.

'Kinship has been key to securing the loyalty of the upper echelons of the military in order to avoid the fate

of Ben Ali and Mubarak. The latter did not have the chance to have a large number of relatives among the top military/security hierarchy, contrary to Bashar al-Assad, whose own brother Maher is the actual no. 1 in the military (other relatives in top military/security positions include Hafez Makhluf, Dhu al-Himma Shalish, Atef Najib and Asef Shawkat, among many others). In such a situation, generals cannot seriously think about sacrificing the president in order to save the system: contrary to their Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts, they are not in a position to claim that they are in fact good guys who have nothing to do with the awful incumbent dictator. They stay with Assad, or they fall with him. Beyond kin ties, the loyalty of the military hierarchy has been secured through sectarianism, since it is likely that a majority of the officers belong to the Alawite community.

?Sectarianism is a powerful instrument to make sure that you can use the army?s full military might against the population. No military that is reasonably representative of the population could do what the Syrian army did over the last two years, i.e. destroying most of the country?s major cities, including large parts of the capital. You need a sectarian or ethnic divide that separates the core of the military from the target population. Algeria went through a nasty civil war in the 1990s, and Algerian generals are ruthless people, but I do not think that the Algerian military ever used heavy artillery against one of the country?s large cities. The fact that the best units in the Syrian military are largely manned with Alawite soldiers (in addition to members of some loyal Bedouin clans) has been key to explaining the level of violence we have seen over the last two years. Of course, the majority of Syrian soldiers are Sunnis, but it is striking that Assad did only use a minority of the army?s available units: according to some observers, only one third of the army was entrusted with combat missions since the start uprising. Seen from that angle, the purported ?cohesion? of the Syrian army becomes much less puzzling: the risk of defections significantly decreases when two-third of the soldiers are in fact locked up in their barracks, or at least kept away from the battlefield.

?Once the military hierarchy is loyal, and once you can use a significant proportion of the army to unleash unlimited violence upon the population, the rest follows. The regime keeps control of major population centres thanks to its much superior firepower and ability to use it, thus it keeps the families of many of its soldiers as de facto hostages. For instance, a friend of mine just defected from the army after his family (which had moved from one of Damascus? suburbs to downtown in order to escape the regime?s air raids) eventually managed to leave for Egypt.

?The regime?s military force also keeps much of the businessmen and middle-class loyal because although they often hate the regime, they know that changing it means civil war, and they do not have enough to lose to take that risk. And actually, even when businessmen cease to actively support the regime (an enormous proportion of them have moved with their assets to Turkey and Egypt over the last year), the regime is still standing, because it still controls the military. Then you have the diplomats who also remain loyal, often because they know that the regime is firmly in control of Damascus, which means that it can kill their relatives and burn their house if they defect. On the contrary, massive defections of Libyan diplomats occurred in 2011 because they had calculated that the regime would fall quickly, not because they had become liberal democrats overnight. It is all about calculation, not about some belief in the legitimacy of the regime.

?Support from religious minorities has also been frequently mentioned as a cause for the resilience of the regime. But except for the very peculiar case of the Alawites, minorities do in fact weigh very little in the balance: even if all Christians were supporting Assad (which of course is not the case, neither for Christians nor for any other sect), we would still be speaking of a mere 5% of the population with very little influence over the state and the military. Other religious minorities are much, much smaller; they do not make a difference.

?In fact, many of the factors that have been frequently invoked to account for the resilience of the Syrian regime were also present in Mubarak's Egypt: crony businessmen and a wealthy middle-class that has benefitted from economic liberalization (in fact much more so in Egypt than in Syria); a non-Muslim population that is anxious at the possible rise of the Islamists after the revolution; a sizeable bureaucracy and a hegemonic party with considerable patronage capacities (in 2011 Mubarak's NDP was probably stronger than the long-neglected Ba'ath party). Yet, none of these factors had any positive impact upon the resilience of Mubarak, which means that the cause for Assad's resilience should be looked for elsewhere: it is the kin-based/sectarian character of the military.

?Then you have external, i.e. Iranian and Russian, support. It has been important, but it only came because the Syrian regime first demonstrated that it was solid enough to be worth spending a few billion dollars on financial and military aid.

?There is one last factor that has been commonly evoked among the left in the Arab world and the west, i.e. Assad's purported 'nationalist legitimacy'. My aim here is not to assess Assad's nationalist credentials, a debate which I find only moderately interesting. My point is that none in Syria decided to side with or against the regime on the basis of its foreign policy, or on the basis of some 'nationalist' sentiment. Making a decision based upon foreign policy issues is a luxury none can afford when a revolutionary process puts your own individual fate at stake: what people have in mind in such circumstances are issues like freedom, dignity, equality, fear, sectarianism, and interest, not 'resistance' or 'sympathy/antipathy for the west'. People chose their side, then they rationalised it ex post by making Assad a beacon of nationalism, or on the contrary, a traitor. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain why formerly pro-Western bourgeois suddenly discovered that they were staunch anti-imperialists, whereas hardline Islamists who had volunteered to fight US troops in Iraq a few years before claimed that they would not mind if NATO was providing them with air support.?

That is to say, if this is a 'communal war', then it is an extremely one-sided one, in which the absolute core of the regime's base of support, the army's top brass, acting through a form of caste and communal solidarity and viewing the world through that distorting prism, are waging a war against the population as a whole, and dragging some of their much poorer cousins into the same fray. We should keep this fact in mind, and understand the apparent 'religious radicalization' that Osborn refers to in his article as a product of the regime's actions, and not necessarily as a symptom of the mutual cumulative radicalization more typical of genuine 'communal wars', all the more so given the massive disparity in firepower involved.

The rebels' base of support and a 'negotiated transition'?

What, then, of the rebels' base of support? The largest component of it, the peasantry and the semi-peasant, semi-proletarian population of the small towns and cities of Syria's countryside, actually used to comprise part of the regime's own base of support until its decisive turn towards neo-liberalism under Bashar al-Assad, as also did the urban lower middle class and a part of the working class. It is no accident that many of the uprising's strongholds have been the small towns and smaller cities that were once considered the regime's (outside of the Alawite minority, that is): for example, Daraa (the birthplace of the uprising), Rastan (birthplace of former defence minister Mustafa Tlass) and Baniyas.

Cheering them on from a safe distance in exile, however, are those parts of the pre-Ba'ath conservative Sunni bourgeoisie that never entirely made their peace with the upstart Ba'athist regime, despite its repeated attempts at reconciliation with them through concessions to private and expatriate capital. It is this layer who have the closest links to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, the Muslim Brotherhood and so forth, and who many Alawites recognize as the children and grandchildren of their own parents?

and grandparents? former exploiters.

And lining up alongside them are those newer layers of Ba'ath-era bourgeois and petit bourgeois intelligentsia who have quite simply lost faith in the Assad regime's ability to govern rationally, on the basis of some form of manufactured consent like that which they themselves used to promote, and which might allow the country to return to a form of stability. Many of this group initially supported Bashar al-Assad's promises of 'reform' and 'dialogue' in the first phase of the uprising, before being forced into complete opposition by his regime's bloodthirsty intransigence.

It is these latter two layers that dominate the fractious civilian opposition in exile, who hog the airtime on Al Jazeera (when it is not being given to regime apologists like Joshua Landis) and who have tried to give the revolution a media-friendly face in the West. Lacking any real support or influence on the ground, they have had to resort to pleading with the major Western imperialist powers for support, demanding that the West provide them with assistance in the form of military aid, 'no-fly' zones and humanitarian assistance. So far, however, they have had to make do with diplomatic conferences (at which their Saudi, Qatari and Turkish sponsors berate them for their lack of credibility) and occasional photo opportunities with William Hague, or Hillary Clinton if they're lucky.

If there is a deal struck between the Assad regime and a part of the Syrian opposition, along the lines of that which Mark Osborn says the AWL 'would not necessarily denounce', then it will be this layer (perhaps amongst others) who will sit on the other side of the table to the regime to strike it. What will it consist of? One need only look at the game of diplomatic footsie being played between the Russian, Chinese and US imperialist powers to guess.

An imperialist consensus

Rather like the 'two-state solution' in Israel-Palestine, which the AWL also supports, the idea of a negotiated transition between the Ba'athist regime and some more or less 'responsible' part of the Syrian opposition actually forms part of a global imperialist diplomatic consensus on Syria. Russian and Chinese imperialism, having promoted their own version of it in Libya, are even more determined to see it through in Syria, feeling cheated and betrayed as they do by the US and European imperialist powers' use of a United Nations resolution that Russia and China voted for to assist the overthrow of Libyan dictator Gaddafi without their prior consent.

The United States, for its part, is wary of any repetition of its Libyan adventure in Syria, sensing not only that it would provoke Russia and China's resistance, but also that it would probably erode rather than enhance its ability to control the outcome of any struggle for power in a post-Assad Syria. Here it has not only learned from the outcome of the revolution and civil war in Libya (with its usual hyperbole about the risk of 'failed states' and so forth), but has had to take into account a number of factors that are specific to the Syrian terrain, not least of which is the security of Israel.

The fact is that for all Hillary Clinton and William Hague's verbal denunciations of Assad's barbarity, and for all of Israel's long-standing demonization of Assad's Syria as a 'terrorist state' allied to Iran and responsible for encouraging Lebanese and Palestinian 'terrorism', Israel and the Western powers far prefer the status quo of a weakened Assad - or a negotiated arrangement that prevents the collapse of the vast repressive apparatus that Assad presides over - to the alternative of a complete military victory for the revolution. The latter, after all, would remove the chief obstacle standing in the way of the Syrian masses in their genuine hostility to Israel, both for its occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and for its occupation, displacement and colonization of the Palestinians.

The United States has therefore fallen in behind Russia and China's policy, effectively apologizing for it while assisting it. In the meantime, they allow (indeed, they cannot seriously prevent) the drip-feed of arms and finance provided to some of the Syrian rebels by their own Saudi and Qatari allies, partly to keep up the pressure on Russia and China to eventually come to terms. Britain gets to play the role of being the most vocal 'Friend of Syria' (that is, of the bourgeois exile opposition) only because everyone knows that it will not take any real steps in any direction without US approval. And in the meantime, Israel acts occasionally to protect its own immediate interests (as with its 'game-changing' air strikes on Damascus in early May 2013), providing the sort of knee-jerk reductionist anti-imperialistas that the AWL so loves to hate with a pretext to hail the Assad regime's meaningless threats of retaliation as a sign of its 'nationalist credentials'.

Why then has a deal not happened yet? I would say partly (again, like the two-state solution in Israel-Palestine) because it is a reactionary utopia, which might fit the interests of a whole range of outside powers (and the ideological preconceptions of a whole range of outside commentators), but which bears no relation to the interests of the actual combatants.

On the one side, the criminal Assad regime already senses the West's hesitation to restrain it and feels emboldened by it. In all likelihood, it genuinely believes that it can 'win the war', or at least indefinitely stave off its inevitable defeat, for as long as Russia, China and Iran do not pull the plug on it. In fact, like Gaddafi before him, Assad harps on repeatedly about the threat of 'Al-Qaeda', hoping in this way to persuade the West that they have (however ineffectually or insincerely) picked the wrong side in this conflict, and that they would be far better off just letting him finish the job.

And on the other side, no-one in their right mind on the side of the Syrian opposition could even entertain the idea of negotiating with the Assad regime, and certainly not now, after it has killed more than 70,000 of its own people, laid waste to its countryside and its major urban centres and imprisoned and tortured hundreds of thousands. To do so would be to invite instant denunciation, and the more or less instant loss of any mass support.

And just in case anyone should entertain this idea, the quarrelling opposition coalitions (the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces) have the example before them of their domestically based rivals, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change of Hassan Abdel Azim, Haytham Manna, Michel Kilo and Aref Dalila. This body actually did call for and try to take part in a conditional dialogue with the Assad regime and its Russian and Chinese sponsors, more or less from the beginning. But even they were eventually forced in January 2013 to reject any direct talks without a prior cessation of the regime's war, the release of prisoners, the delivery of humanitarian aid and a declaration about the fate of missing persons.

Is this just the 'normal' intransigence of belligerent parties to a conflict, which Western diplomats and liberals typically and patronizingly assume can be dealt with by bashing a few heads together, and by allowing events to teach them a lesson or two in 'realism'? It is conceivable, perhaps, that in six months? or a years? time a wing of the opposition may emerge that is willing to do a deal, and that the Russians and Chinese could be prevailed upon to persuade Assad to go quietly into exile in Qatar or Belarus or Dubai?

Perhaps. But it would be possible only on the basis of a serious defeat for the revolution - either through its military exhaustion, or through the direct military intervention of some outside power. And it would signify a further, political, defeat for the revolution, leaving in place the regime's apparatus of torture and murder while removing only its leading figureheads, rather like the 'negotiated transition' that took place in Yemen, after Ali Abdullah Saleh handed over the presidency to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

This is what a deal between the Ba'athist regime and the Syrian opposition, of the sort that Mark Osborn says that the AWL 'will not necessarily denounce' looks like, concretely.

Defeat from within and without

Does this entirely answer the question? Here I have a confession to make: I too am worried by the influence of the Islamists (and of the much smaller jihadi forces), by the emergence of sectarianism amongst elements of the opposition, by the fact that the oppositional left remains small, by the dependence of the armed opposition on outside aid and by the related struggle to render them accountable to the mass movement.

I might pose the problem as follows: there is a struggle going on within the revolution, just as there is in Egypt and Tunisia, except that the prolonged nature of the revolution and civil war has meant that it is taking place now, even before the regime has even fallen.

The longer the Assad regime remains in power, the longer it continues brutalizing its own people and encouraging sectarianism, and the longer the Syrian revolution remains internationally isolated and without effective sources of material aid, then the more the military struggle will come to dominate the mass struggle rather than act as an expression of it, the greater will be the influence of outside powers on the armed opposition, and the more it will happen that sectarian and socially reactionary elements will be able to consolidate their power and support.

That is to say, the longer the Assad regime remains in power, the greater is the risk that the revolution will be defeated from within as well as from without. The more quickly the regime goes (by which I mean not just Assad but the whole repressive Ba'athist state apparatus that Osborn is apparently worried about seeing the armed opposition 'overrun?'), then the more quickly it will be possible to isolate and restrain elements like Jabhat al-Nusra and act to ensure the accountability of the popular militias.

The ascendance of sectarian and jihadi elements, however, is only one of the ways in which the revolution could be defeated from within. The other way would be precisely through a deal between the regime and a part of the opposition. And in fact this one leads us right back to the other: it would practically mean handing over the leadership both of the mass movement and of the armed struggle to the Islamists, who (quite rightly, if for reasons of their own) would denounce the signatories to any such deal as enemies of the people and continue their struggle against the regime without them.

In order to run away from one possible defeat of the revolution from within, the AWL accepts another possible defeat as being, at the very least, a lesser evil. Why is this? It is difficult not to conclude that there is an element of Islamophobia involved, that the AWL, at the very least, regards bourgeois Islamists in beards (or 'Muslims?', to return to Pham Binh's exploration of the frequent confusion of the two) as being more of a threat to 'the welfare of ordinary Syrians and the possibility of progressive struggle' than bourgeois politicians in suits, or bourgeois officers in military fatigues.

The fog of war

Osborn cites seven examples to 'prove' his point that the existing manifestations of social reaction and breakdown are severe enough that this changes the character of the conflict overall. Of these, one 'a YouTube posting by a Jordanian Salafi cleric apparently permitting the rape of non-Muslim women' is pure hyperbole. One could easily, if one wanted to, look for and find YouTube postings by extremists of this sort in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya or indeed any Western country, without making any reference to their actual degree of support.

Another report should actually be an encouraging sign: that civilian residents in Mayadeen in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province (one of Syria's more conservative regions) have protested against the presence of Jabhat al-Nusra, and its attempts to translate this presence into a form of rule.

And a third is questionable to say the least: the claim that 80,000 Christians (50,000 in earlier versions of this story) have been forced to leave Homs as a result of Islamist harassment. The main source for this story has been Mother Agnes-Mariam de la Croix, someone who other Syrian Christians have denounced as a tool of the regime doing its dirty work in spreading rumours designed to incite mutual sectarian suspicion.

And here it is worth noting a number of facts. First of all, that Homs's Christians, by and large, supported the revolution (in fact many of the early peaceful protests took place in Homs's Christian districts). Secondly, that Homs has practically been levelled by the regime's bombardment and depopulated as a result of it. Thirdly, if it were true that anti-regime forces had specifically targeted such a large number of Syrian Christians, then where have they gone? All the refugee camps that we are aware of are either outside of the country or in the "liberated zones", and can therefore be assumed to hold refugees from the regime's violence.

If there were any large number of refugees from the rebels hailing from a minority now living in government-held territory, then one would expect the Assad regime to broadcast this fact to the world, as "proof" of its claims to be the protector of Syria's minorities. It seems far more credible that Christian Homsis, like most other Homsis, have fled their city as a result of the regime's own savagery.

However, without further examination, I am willing to accept the other four claims, as a proof of the struggle that is taking place within the revolution itself. And just in case my scepticism about the three above indicates any complacency on my part, I can add a couple more.

One is the kidnapping in late April 2013 of Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi. This fits into a broader pattern (that Osborn also refers to) of kidnappings by shadowy forces occasionally claiming some political veneer for their actions, sometimes kidnapping for ransom, and sometimes with a sectarian element.

The other is an incident in Aqrab near Hama in December 2012, where there are conflicting accounts about the death or wounding of between ten and 200 Alawite civilians, with both the rebels and the regime blaming each other for the deaths, and with the likelihood at the very least that these civilians were being used as hostages or as human shields. And indeed one could try to catalogue further stories of this kind, keeping in mind that there is a much more real "genocide" than the one predicted by Joshua Landis taking place right now, against the country's Sunni-majority population.

This should make it all the more remarkable and laudable and encouraging that there remain members of Syria's Alawite, Christian and Druze minorities who still side with the revolution. Like the Christian and Druze doctors and medical staff who a Syrian-Palestinian activist that we interviewed recently at the World Social Forum in Tunis informed us were providing much-needed medical aid to the Palestinians under the regime's siege in Yarmouk, a densely populated Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. Or like the exiled Alawite-origin novelist Samar Yazbek, who wrote the following in early May 2013:

"I had to return to Syria. Assad's aircraft were bombing bakeries, villages and farms. They bombarded civilians with explosives and sent a rain of poison down. In July last year I went back to the north, to the village of Banash, near Idlib. It was here that I saw the real Syria for the first time. The assault was continuous. Snipers were dotted throughout the rebel-controlled areas and Free Syrian Army checkpoints

were all along the roads. There was scarcely any sign of extremist Islamists. In towns such as Saraqeb, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Muthafar al-Nawab and songs of love and struggle spread through the streets. The notion of a civil state dominated. The economic situation had deteriorated but was still bearable and sectarian tensions were not high. I travelled between the villages of the liberated north, hearing stories of death and heroism. I had conversations with various factions of the FSA, who spoke of a civil state even though many of them were Islamists. In August 2012, I was able to speak with a leading figure of the FSA and the tribal groups, discussing the state of sectarian relations and the importance of avoiding civil war. After my visit, my conviction in the revolution was stronger than ever. I came to understand what it means to die nobly.?

Marxist method, democratic struggles and stability?

I have, so far, concentrated on arguing against the specific conjunctural justifications for the AWL's position. There is, however, a deeper question of method involved, one which Osborn himself points to in citing the AWL's opposition to the slogan of 'Troops Out' in Ireland (and to which I might add its similar opposition to the slogan of 'Troops Out' in Iraq), and which he describes as being about 'the Marxist attitude to the state?.'

And of course, it is possible to contest the specifics in these cases also: that it was (and remains) the British presence and its preservation of the Northern sectarian statelet that fuelled the inter-communal conflict in Ireland, just as it was the US-led occupation that lay behind the sectarian bloodbath in Iraq. And, as already noted, a Syria in which the Assad regime is able to buy a temporary lease of life through a deal with the less popular and less principled elements of the opposition would be far from being a 'normal' place in which it might be possible to advance the prospects for women's rights, progressive struggles and so forth.

But I am concerned here with the method itself. Underlying it is an assumption, not always clearly stated, that the best conditions for working class struggle (and for all the progressive and liberatory struggles that go with it) are those of 'normality?', in the sense generally understood by bourgeois commentators: of stability, the rule of law, functioning parliamentary rule, the existence of a state monopoly of the means of coercion and so forth. And if this 'breathing space?' (to use a phrase that the AWL occasionally used in opposing the demand for the unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq) is being provided by the British security forces, by occupying US troops, or by a betrayal of the revolution by the Syrian bourgeois opposition exiles, then we should grit our teeth and bear it, for fear of something far worse.

In fact, Osborn actually comes close to stating this assumption outright, arguing that:

'Many of the middle class professionals have fled the country. The death rate is increasing (the equivalent number of killings in the UK, over the two year period of the uprising would be over 190,000). The working class has, essentially, been destroyed, with regular work only existing in pockets of regime controlled territory, and provided to regime loyalists to maintain that loyalty; these are not good conditions to build a democracy, even assuming that those with power intend that.'

This approaches the struggle for democratic rights - one which Marxists understand as a key component of a revolutionary struggle by the working class for political power - from the point of view of the 'nation-building?' antics so beloved of various US administrations, and most notoriously the neoconservative faction that held such sway over US foreign policy under George W Bush.

Of course, it is quite true at a trivial level that in an advanced imperialist democracy like Britain or France or Germany, with decades of uninterrupted bourgeois parliamentary rule behind it, the working class has had

more time and better opportunity to build for itself (bureaucratized and reformist) mass parties and mass trade unions than it does in an authoritarian dictatorship like Mubarak's Egypt, never mind in a totalitarian one like Assad's Syria or Gaddafi's Libya. But this truism is quite meaningless in a revolution, and in particular in a democratic revolution, where all classes of society (acting through the full range of extant political parties, currents and ideologies) are fighting tooth and nail to reshape the very landscape on which they struggle against each other.

To argue, as Osborn does, that "There is no oppositional force, good or bad, currently capable of replacing the existing state and keeping the country more or less together" is to take the normative forms of struggle in a labour movement dominated by social democratic reformism, by parliamentary careerists and trade union bureaucrats, and to apply it to precisely the sort of situation where by definition, the material preconditions for it do not and cannot exist.

As the Jewish anti-Zionist philosophy professor Michael Neumann has argued recently in his article "Why Support the Syrian Revolution?", concerning the "disunity" of the Syrian rebels:

"Usually you speak of disunity in reference to something once united – a movement, a party, a state. And normally, that's what you find when there is a revolution. But no one tut-tutted that the French Revolution "lacked unity". Like the Syrian revolution, that was a spontaneous uprising whose very disunity testified to the depth and breadth of its roots.

"This is no mere historical oddity. It is proof of something quite unexpected: that a people, starting with nothing, can prevail against a tyrannous modern state with as large and sophisticated a repressive apparatus as any tyrant could desire. The key component of this proof is the courage of the Syrian people. That too exceeds anything previously encountered: never before have civilians refused to be cowed by such widespread cruelty, such firepower, and such slaughter.

"The Syrian revolution brings new hope to the world, and therefore demands wholehearted, unqualified support. Unqualified support does not mean heedless support. It does not preclude resolve to address the very real dangers such a revolution poses. Of course supporters also must be ready to work against sectarian infighting and other forms of extremist violence, both in Syria itself and beyond. But these dangers must be countered in any case. These frightening possibilities should blind no one to the compelling obligation, not to sit on the sidelines, but to help that revolution succeed."

What is it that lies behind this flawed method? I would argue that it is principally concerned with the question of agency, of which material social force is to be entrusted with the tasks of what Marxists have historically referred to as the "bourgeois-democratic revolution". It is, after all, the favoured device of imperialist diplomacy and bourgeois journalism to talk of the threat or actuality of "failed states", "age-old ethnic hatreds" and "chaos" precisely in those situations where the ruling class sees no obvious or credible agent capable of executing its will and managing its affairs for it at an acceptable price.

Searching in Syria for a working-class agency (or perhaps for a "third camp", that fabled unicorn of post-Trotskyist politics), and failing to see one behind all the beards, the AWL has fallen in behind the same trope. Except that, unlike some, like Joseph Massad and As'ad AbuKhalil, who have fallen into this position partly through despair and partly through a lingering attachment to the symbols of a Cold War-era Arab radicalism, the AWL has done so more consistently and on the basis of an explicitly elaborated premise, on Syria as on Palestine, as on Ireland, as on Iraq.

If there is a first here, it is that this time around, it is not the army of an imperialist country or a colonizing settler-state that is apparently acting as an unintentional and self-interested barrier against chaos and

social collapse, but that of an avowedly ?anti-imperialist? Third World nationalist dictatorship.

The irony is that this now places the AWL in the same camp as those, like Counterfire?s John Rees and Lindsey German, who in previous wars the AWL attacked as irresponsible and dogmatic knee-jerk anti-imperialists, for defending (however crudely) the right of oppressed nations to resist occupation and colonization, and whose actual ?knee-jerk anti-imperialism? on Syria today has led them to recycle precisely the same tropes about Islamism that were previously the AWL?s own remit on the British far left.

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