

Toward an anarchist policy on Syria

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I. Introduction

At the moment, the Middle East (taken broadly, that is, the area from North Africa to Pakistan) is the part of the world experiencing the greatest political instability and undergoing the most rapid change. At the center of the turmoil is Syria, now in its third year of civil war with no sign of any resolution in sight. Given the centrality of Syria to global politics, it is essential that anarchists understand what is going on there and develop a critical attitude toward the events that are unfolding. Unfortunately, we are not experts on the history and current dynamics of Syria and of the Middle East as a whole. The following theses are therefore presented with humility. We would greatly appreciate input from others, particularly those with greater background in the area, especially anarchists living in the region, in the development of our position.

II. International and Historic Context

It is impossible to understand what is going on in Syria today without some knowledge of the international and historical context in which the events are taking place. In very broad strokes, it is worth mentioning:

A. The ebbing of the power of US imperialism.

The United States became the hegemonic power in the Middle East during the 1950s, taking the place of British imperialism, whose weakness had been revealed by the events of World War II and the immediate post-war period. This hegemony (which included the colonial powers of Western Europe as junior partners) was occasionally challenged by the Russians (then in the form of the Soviet Union), who sought to intervene in the area by supporting nationalist, anti-imperialist forces.

These forces often took power through “national revolutions,” usually military coups led by junior officers, who, once in power, tilted toward, and received aid from, the Soviet Union. Such regimes included Nasser’s in Egypt, a similar one in Syria (which from 1958 to 1961 was united with Egypt in the so-called “United Arab Republic”), and one in Iraq. When Nasser died, he was replaced by Anwar al-Sadat, who eventually (in 1979) signed a peace treaty with Israel and aligned Egypt firmly with the United States. In Iraq and Syria, a series of military coups brought to power strongmen, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad in Syria, respectively, who sought to play off the USSR and the United States, while generally leaning toward the Russians. In Iran, a secular nationalist, Mossadeq, was overthrown by US-backed coup in 1953, which brought to power the very pro-West Shah. He was overthrown in 1979 and replaced by a Shiite theocratic government (still in power) which has generally opposed both the US and the Russians. Despite all this, the overall power of US imperialism, based firmly on Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and after 1979, Egypt, was never seriously threatened.

Today, however, US imperialism is in retreat, as the economic crisis of 2008 has exposed the underlying economic and social problems of US society. Meanwhile, there is no country which, at least as of yet, has the power to take its place. Although Chinese imperialism, the international extension of the state capitalist system in China, is increasing its penetration of many areas of the globe (including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Africa, and Latin America), it is not yet capable of taking the United States’ place as the hegemonic power in any one region, and

certainly not in the Middle East. This weakening of overall imperialist domination, combined with the effects of globalization on the countries in the area, has inspired political and social forces among the middle classes to seek political power for themselves. These groups, including militant Islamic organizations and pro-Western liberals, have managed to assume the leadership of much broader social layers who have been plagued by rampant unemployment (particularly among young people), decrepit housing and urban infrastructures, inflation, and the other results of uneven economic growth. The results of this complex social process have included the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the revolution, now taking the form of a civil war, in Syria.

B. The decline of the West.

The longer range historical context in which the events in Syria and the Middle East as a whole are taking place is the global decline of the West, that is, the waning of the international hegemony of the European nations and their offshoots. This hegemony was rooted in the explosive economic expansion that began in Western Europe in (roughly) 1500, based on the development, first, of mercantile capitalism, and then, 300 years later, of industrial capitalism. This dynamic growth was an international phenomenon, resulting in the emergence and spread of what became known as Western imperialism. While this imperialism met with comparatively little resistance from the indigenous populations of the Western hemisphere, who succumbed rather quickly to military conquest and, even more so, to diseases for which they had no immunity, it was not so fortunate elsewhere in the world. This was especially the case in the Middle East, where highly cultured, technologically advanced civilizations had existed for many centuries. Here, European penetration was only partial; entire countries, including Afghanistan, Persia/Iran, and Turkey, were never fully conquered by Europeans/European-Americans. The result, for several hundred years, was an unstable stalemate between the ruling (landlord and capitalist) classes of the West, on the one hand, and the ruling elites of the Middle East (however we might define them, e.g. semi-feudal, bureaucratic, Asiatic-despotic) on the other.

In fact, the conflict between the two regions goes back even further. Specifically:

1. The explosive growth of Islam and Islamic civilization throughout the Middle East, into south and southeast Asia, across north Africa, and into Europe (Spain and southern France) in the late 7th and early 8th centuries; and
2. The counter-attack by the Europeans, in the form of the Reconquista in Spain and, later, the Crusades.

When looked at from this long-term perspective, what we see is a trans-epochal conflict between two regions/cultures/civilizations, in which, at the moment, the European/Euro-American, after centuries of aggressive expansion, has moved onto the defensive. This “war of civilizations” remains, however vaguely, in the historic memories of the peoples of the Middle East to this day and fuels much of the nationalism and religious fanaticism that is now so prevalent throughout the region.

C. The problem of imperialist imposed national identities.

It is important to remember that one important outcome of this centuries-old conflict, and particularly its more recent developments, is that many of the existing nation-states of the Middle East are artificial constructions. When it became clear that the multi-ethnic (Turkish-dominated) Ottoman Empire would collapse after World War I, the British and the French, in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, drew largely arbitrary lines on the map to demarcate modern national states (where before there had been only historical/geographical regions or administrative divisions). They then parceled out these states to themselves, (e.g., Lebanon and Syria to the French; Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq to the British). The result was that, in contrast to Europe, where nation states (and corresponding nationalities) had centuries to take shape and be consolidated, in the Middle East (and in the Balkan Peninsula, which was under Turkish/Islamic rule for centuries), the process of nation-building had to take place very rapidly, in a haphazard fashion. It is largely because of this that, aside from the conflicts among the states in the area, many of the states comprise what should be seen as “imperialist imposed national identities.” In these countries (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine), people define themselves as much, or even more, by sectarian considerations (e.g., whether a person is a member of a Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Druze, Christian, or Jewish community) than by nationalistic commitments to the nations of which they are a part.

III. The Syrian Revolution

A. The Syrian revolution broke out in March of 2011, as a largely spontaneous movement among the middle and lower classes of Syria, primarily young, and primarily, although not exclusively, urban. It began in Dar’a, in southern Syria, and for many months grew in militancy, size, and scope on a non-violent basis: sit-ins, mass demonstrations, and land occupations. Its main demands centered on the immediate needs of the people, primarily for jobs, and the need to set the stage for a transition to a more democratic political system after three decades of a brutal dictatorship under the Assads.

B. The Assad dynasty was established by Hafez al-Assad, who rose to power through the Syrian Air Force, the Syrian wing of the Arab Socialist Ba’athist Party, and the government. Involved in several coups, through which the Ba’ath party (in 1963) and he himself (in 1971) gained full power, Assad served as Minister of Defense, Prime Minister, and, ultimately, President. (Although, under the constitution promulgated by Assad in 1973, the president is elected by the Syrian population every seven years, there has usually been only one candidate on the ballot.) Upon the elder Assad’s death in 2000, his son, Bashar, stood for election, won, and was reelected in 2007.

Although the Syrian government is technically a republic, it is actually despotically ruled by the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, which heads an alliance of six other parties in the Progressive National Front and dominates the country’s rubberstamp unicameral legislature. (“Ba’ath” means “resurrection” or “renaissance” in Arabic.) The party, with branches in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, was founded in 1947 by secular members of the middle classes as an expression of Arab nationalism and was embraced by junior military officers, including the elder Assad, in the 50s and 60s. Among the central aspects of the Ba’athist pro-

gram were/are: anti-Zionism/anti-imperialism, secularism, socialism (meaning state ownership of much of the economy, central planning, and [essentially] one-party rule), and a commitment to a vaguely-defined “pan-Arabism.” Despite this program, the Assad regime bases itself internally on the members of the Alawite sect of Islam (an offshoot of the Shi’a), to which the Assads belong. Most members of the government inner circle, as well as occupiers of leadership posts in the Ba’ath party and the economy, are members of this sect, which has thus been elevated into a privileged stratum that rules over a majority (76%) Sunni population.

- C. Domestically, Assad sought to secularize and modernize the country by, for example, granting more rights to women, expanding education, and building Syria’s infrastructure through public works projects financed by the Russians, other Arab governments, and international lending agencies. He also ruthlessly suppressed opposition by imprisoning, torturing, and killing dissidents, and, in 1980, by crushing a Muslim Brotherhood-organized uprising and slaughtering up to 25,000 people.
- D. Internationally, Assad, as mentioned above, aligned himself with the Russians and sought to present himself as anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian, and a leader of the Arab world. As defense minister under a civilian Ba’athist government, he presided over a war with Israel (the so-called “Six Day War”) in 1967, and after seizing full power in 1971, another conflict (known as the “Yom Kippur War” in Israel and the “Ramadan War” in the Arab world) in 1973. Both of these resulted in substantial victories for Israel and a significant expansion of Israeli-occupied territory, including the Golan Heights (which had previously been under Syrian control), the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula (which was eventually given back to the Egyptians). In the face of the Israelis’ overwhelming military superiority, Assad shifted his attention to Lebanon, intervening in that country to defend Palestinian guerrillas and non-combatant refugees from periodic Israeli invasions and to maintain Syrian hegemony over the sect-divided nation. Ultimately (in 1982), Syria occupied the entire country, an occupation that ended only in 2005. Assad’s involvement in Lebanon (both directly and through its sponsorship of the Shia-based Hezbollah militia) thus served as a kind of proxy war with Israel, while he accepted a de facto military truce with that country.

In fact, for Assad, Syrian national, and even narrowly Shi’a, interests always trumped pan-Arabism. Thus, when he perceived those interests to be threatened by the Iraqi regime of fellow-Ba’athist (but Sunni), Saddam Hussein, Assad supported (Shi-ite, non-Arab) Iran in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–89), and in 1990, the US war against Iraq. Later, Bashar Assad opposed the US invasion of Iraq, which led to the imposition of sanctions by the United States and its allies. Domestically, Bashar attempted to continue the modernization of the country by, for example, loosening up government control and allowing private enterprise in banking and other sectors of the economy. More recently, he tried to achieve a rapprochement with US imperialism, by, among other things, withdrawing from Lebanon. Two results of these policies were a drastic increase in corruption and an intensification of the desire of the Syrian population for greater political freedom.

- E. While the struggle in Syria began on a non-violent basis and eventually mobilized significant sectors of the Syrian people, the aggressive, extremely brutal response of the govern-

ment forced the opposition to arm itself. One result of this has been the militarization of the struggle. This has forced the unarmed masses of people to the sidelines (and into refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon) and turned what had been a popular revolution into a civil war between the Syrian government, backed by the Alawite minority, on the one hand, and opposition militias, supported by the Sunni majority, on the other. Despite great odds, including brutal aerial bombardment and the likely use of chemical weapons on the part of the regime, the rebel forces, eventually and for the most part organized under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, put the regime onto the defensive and forced it into ever-smaller pieces of territory.

- F. Unfortunately, the militarization of the struggle and its protracted nature have increasingly internationalized the conflict. At first, this was largely a question of outside commando forces, such as the Sunni fundamentalist militia, Al Qaeda in Iraq, joining the fighting on the side of the rebels. Somewhat later, the conflict on the border with Turkey wound up drawing a response from the Turkish military. Meanwhile, as the Russians have stepped up their military aid to the Assad regime, the Israelis, concerned that missiles being sent to the government might wind up being used against itself, launched missile strikes into Syria. Most recently, Hezbollah, worried about the eventual defeat of its Syrian patron and a victory for the Sunni majority, has sent its own well-trained military forces into the fray. Their presence, it seems, was crucial to the recent government victory in retaking the border town of al-Qusayr from the rebels.
- G. Although from early on, the United States has verbally and diplomatically indicated its support of the struggle against the Assad regime, it is not clear how much this policy has been motivated by a serious commitment to the rebels and how much by the need to protect its image as the promoter of bourgeois democracy, both in the region and internationally. The US ruling class has always been extremely wary of mass struggle, large numbers of lower class people mobilizing to fight for their needs. Such masses can easily “get out of control,” that is, fall under the influence of “irresponsible” forces, abandon non-violent struggle, and threaten political overturns that are inimical to the US’s imperialist interests. For this reason, the US almost always prefers to see very slow, very moderate, and very peaceful political change, preferably under the tutelage of one or more outside (read “imperialist”) country. This is the case even when, all other things being equal, the US imperialists would prefer to see a pro-Western, democratic regime in power in Syria in place of the unpredictable, and often anti-US, Assad dictatorship. Along with the war-weariness of the US population and the fiscal need to cut the US military budget, it is this that explains the tepid, vacillating nature of the United States’ response to the Syrian struggle. Probably most important in hindsight, the US, fearing the escalation of violence (and worried about weapons getting into the hands of fundamentalist militias), hesitated to supply arms to the rebels, let alone take stronger measures, such as establishing a no-fly zone to protect the rebel forces from Assad’s aerial bombardment. Meanwhile, the Russian, the Iranian, and the Chinese governments have had fewer scruples, using their diplomatic leverage to support the Assad regime and, at least in the case of the Russians and Iranians, supplying armed forces and weapons to the Syrian military. The result is that the United States now finds itself behind the 8-ball. As we write this, the Obama administration, citing the Assad

government's use of chemical weapons as its rationale, has decided to send some weapons (mostly small arms and perhaps some anti-tank guns) to the rebels. This is not likely to make much of a difference to the outcome of the struggle.

- H. To make matters worse, the struggle in Syria now seems to be spilling over into Lebanon, as Shia militias there (perhaps under directive from Assad) have begun firing into Sunni communities, with Sunni militias returning fire. There have also been exchanges of gunfire across the Syrian-Israeli border. One possible result of all this is that the Syrian struggle, which began as a popular rebellion against a brutal dictatorship, may escalate into a region-wide conflict, a proxy war in which the major powers line up behind the opposing (sectarian) forces. Such an escalation, if left unchecked, could threaten an even bigger conflagration.

IV. Our Position

In light of this complex and rapidly developing situation, what position should anarchists take?

- A. Our own view is that we should see the conflict in Syria as still being predominantly a popular revolution in which the majority of the Syrian people are fighting against an arbitrary dictatorship. The overthrow of that regime would be a victory for the Syrian people. It would also create a situation which, however temporary it might be, would give the Syrian workers and peasants, as well as consciously libertarian forces, the opportunity to pursue the struggle for real freedom. We advocate this position in spite of the fact that the United States and its allies in Western Europe and elsewhere have given diplomatic support, humanitarian aid, and now arms, to the rebels. While we never feel comfortable being on the same side as the United States, we do not see the rebels as mere proxies for the imperialists, under their control and dependent on them financially. Particularly because of the hesitancy of the US to get involved and despite the presence in their ranks of Syrian and foreign Islamic fundamentalist militias, the rebel armies still appear to be independent, popular forces and therefore worthy of support.
- B. Yet, in supporting the Syrian rebels, it is important to clarify what kind of support we are talking about. As far as we can tell, the leadership of the struggle in Syria is made up of a combination of pro-Western liberals, moderate Islamic organizations, and fundamentalist Islamic militias. (And as the fighting continues, it is likely that the fundamentalists will increasingly dominate the rebel coalition. Some of these forces are fiercely authoritarian and would be even worse than the Assad regime in whatever area they could establish power) None of these forces in any serious sense represents the people. In other words, rather than aiming at a revolution that overturns hierarchical power relations and establishes the democratic, egalitarian rule of the lower classes, they aim simply to set up some kind of traditional, class-based government — a US-style bourgeois democracy, a moderate Islamic regime, or a fundamentalist theocracy — while maintaining the existing class structure of Syria intact. Thus, while we favor the overthrow of the Assad regime, we do not wish to spread illusions about what the opposition leaders' goals are, what kind of societies they wish to establish, and whom they really represent. The tactics we advocate of independent

intervention and tactical blocs enables us to do this.

If anarchists had a significant presence in Syria today we should simultaneously attempt to coordinate our activity (including military actions, if we had fighting forces) with the political organizations and armed forces of the other anti-Assad organizations, while carrying out our own independent propaganda and agitation among the lower classes. This propaganda and agitation would explain that, while they, too, should be fighting alongside the bourgeois forces that are currently leading the struggle, they should have no illusions in what those forces represent. Instead, they should utilize the struggle to organize to take power for themselves, that is, to set up popular councils and other mass democratic structures to run their communities, the enterprises in which they work, and Syrian society as a whole. Thus, assuming that the rebel forces are victorious against Assad, we and the popular classes would be in a strong position to continue the fight for a true social revolution under whatever transitional government is set up in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

- C. In sum, what we are proposing amounts to seeking to establish a tactical bloc with the other forces involved in the struggle against the Assad regime while maintaining our own independent organizations and carrying out independent activity to foment anarchist revolution. This includes exposing the bourgeois, non-popular nature of the groups with whom we are in a temporary alliance.

If we do not advocate this approach, or something like it, we are left to choose (and perhaps to vacillate) between two other policies, neither of which is satisfactory. One would be to give full (military and political) support to the rebel forces, which runs the danger of spreading illusions about them, thus disorienting the popular classes in the aftermath of the military struggle. The other would be to adopt a “plague on both your houses” approach, which would mean attempting to remain neutral between the pro- and anti-Assad forces and allowing the military struggle to play out without anarchist intervention. At least at this juncture, we should prefer a policy that would enable us to intervene in the struggle on the side of the anti-Assad forces, while continuing to advocate and organize for an anarchist revolution.

- D. For those of us far away from the frontlines, the same general approach applies.

First, we should attempt to alert our friends, family, co-workers, and comrades to the important struggle underway in Syria. We should promote and circulate anti-authoritarian news coverage, analysis, and requests for solidarity, especially from anarchists and anti-authoritarians in Syria and the Middle East. We should argue against those activists who uphold the Assad regime as some sort of principled anti-imperialist force or unselfish friend of the Palestinians.

Where possible (and feasible, given our small numbers and competing priorities) we should join protest movements and solidarity campaigns in support of the revolution in Syria. Anarchists should be constructive participants in these movements while also advocating our specific concerns and vision. While defending the rebels right to obtain weapons by any means necessary, we should expose the motives of, and argue against any reliance on the U.S., other Western powers, or the rich Gulf states. We should oppose authoritarian fundamentalism, particularly the reactionary sexist and sectarian politics, while also defending the rights of religious Muslims to organize themselves and participate

in the movement.

As in all the movements we participate in we should advocate for grassroots democracy, direct action, and solidarity with other struggles and oppose hierarchal control, legalistic strategy, and protective isolation. In all our work we should seek to make anti-authoritarian revolution a pole of discussion, action and interest.

- E. Increasingly, what is missing is the independent, self-organization of popular resistance. This is what made the Arab Spring and had an effect all over the world. Without an independent expression of this popular resistance, we fear the energy of the past 3 years will be channeled into military or fundamentalist approaches. Across the region, from Syria to Egypt, the radical and democratic currents from below have not been able to sustain themselves because of the inability to articulate and gain wide support organizationally and politically.

If the Syrian rebels become dominated by authoritarian fundamentalist forces or if the struggle does, in fact, turn into a region-wide conflict between forces backed by the United States, the European nations, and Israel, and those supported by Russia, China, and Iran, we might have to consider adopting an alternate position. But, for the moment, and based on the information we have, this is the position we should advocate.

- F. At the moment we publish, there has been a dramatic urging for attack on the Assad government after recent chemical weapons use in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. All sides are in dispute over responsibility for the attack, with the Assad government blaming the rebels and the rebels and the US blaming Assad. With the limited information we have, we think it quite likely that Assad was responsible. Nonetheless, we think it is a mistake to call for or support military intervention—either limited or broad—by the US or its allies. Any air strike by the US or its allies will only serve to disorient the popular Syrian revolution, shifting the centrality of the uprising from domestic opposition to that of a Western imperial effort. The US/Western aim, obviously, is to control and limit the revolution, make sure any new government follows pro-Western policies, and that power will be in the hands of pro-Western elites and not the people. In place of calling for or relying on Western intervention, the rebels should be demanding arms with no strings attached, should militantly oppose intervention in Syria under whatever pretext, and should resolutely resist efforts by outside forces to exert any kind of control over their revolution.

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