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The U.S. protests: Lessons from Syria

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June 5, 2020

Retrieved on 4th June 2021 from www.aljumhuriya.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

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Everyone will have an opinion, including people who know absolutely nothing

When an uprising breaks out everyone will become an “expert” on the country overnight. And, with that, I’ll finish this piece. Because whilst I’m fortunate enough to speak English and have some contact with people on the ground participating in the current protests, allowing me limited access to information regarding what is happening, I’m no expert. I’ve spent a total of only six weeks in the US, and have never been involved in political organizing there, nor have I spent years researching and studying the country, its politics, economy, and culture, which might enable me to give an informed opinion. Now really is the one time we should be centering American voices and listening to, and learning from, the people directly affected.

An authoritarian state will target the media

Under the Assad dictatorship, Syria has never had a free media. During the revolution, journalists became key targets for arrest and assassination due to their witnessing and reporting on state brutality. Countless Syrian citizen journalists have lost their lives trying to report the regime's crimes to the world. They have been targeted not only by the state but also by other authoritarian groups that have clamped down on independent voices and civil society. Foreign war correspondents, too, have been deliberately assassinated by the regime, such as the American journalist Marie Colvin, killed while covering the 2012 siege of Homs. Meanwhile, the regime and its supporters attempt to control the narrative through state and sympathetic media.

In the US, there have been multiple examples of police deliberately targeting journalists during the protests for George Floyd. Sometimes these have included a clear racial element, such as the arrest of a black CNN reporter while his white colleagues were left alone. According to a report by independent open-source investigators at Bellingcat, "journalists have been shot with rubber bullets, targeted with stun grenades, tear gassed, physically attacked, pepper sprayed, and arrested."

It's important to give as much support as possible to independent media, and especially citizen journalists, who are on the ground and can give better-informed analysis of the situation as it unfolds, providing vital context and links to those most immediately affected by events.

Over the past few days, an uprising has raged in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States in response to the murder of George Floyd by police. In the spirit of solidarity with those on the streets, I was prompted to think about the lessons from the Syrian revolution that might be applicable to the US context.

People rise up when they can no longer breathe

In Syria, the first protest to take place was a direct response to police brutality. On 17 February, 2011, some 1,500 people gathered in the Damascene neighborhood of Hareeqa following an incident in which traffic police beat up the son of a local trader. Yet the wider context for the uprising was four decades of political repression and socioeconomic injustice under the Assad dictatorship, and the impetus given by the transnational revolutionary wave that was emerging across the region. Protests grew exponentially in response to further acts of violence by the state against protesters. The brutal killing of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb, who died in police custody after being detained at a protest in Daraa, caused thousands to take to the streets. The more vicious the state's response to the protests, the more it galvanized the Syrian people. Soon demands for "reform" became cries for "revolution."

The brutal killing of George Floyd also acted as a catalyst for protests in the US. It comes, however, on the back of long-term, systemic societal and institutional racism; the social, political, and economic marginalization of black communities; and a long history of police brutality which disproportionately targets black men. The response of the state to the current protests will be one factor determining the future direction the movement takes.

Social movements are diverse and contain many different currents

The Syrian revolution was characterized by its diversity. It contained men and women from all of Syria's different localities and ethnic and religious groups united around the aims of freedom, democracy, and social justice. Undoubtedly it also contained diverse political currents, as beyond these immediate aims no political program for the future of Syria was articulated; it was assumed that would be worked out through an electoral process. Whilst the movement certainly contained many contradictory elements, extremist Islamists did not have a visible presence initially, despite propaganda to that effect by the state and its supporters. Extremist Islamism grew over the years in response to the violent chaos wrought by the state, following the trajectory of the peaceful protest movement towards armed struggle. Free Syrians then had to battle on two fronts; against both the Assad regime and extremist Islamist elements which tried to hijack the movement.

By contrast, in the US, far-right elements are visible on the streets from the outset, trying to capitalize on and hijack the protests for their own ends. Their presence is not a reason to reject the whole movement. Progressives should stand in solidarity with progressive elements and communities most impacted by state violence. Through solidarity, we give strength to those who reflect the values and ideals we hold, and support them to grow and effectively challenge their opponents.

As for the US, figures from the European Union have stated they are "shocked and appalled" by the killing of George Floyd, and have reiterated their support for peaceful protest, in language very similar to that used in response to Syria's protests over eight years ago. China, furious at Washington's support for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, and criticism over its handling of the Coronavirus, has been more outspoken. It has rhetorically backed the protest movement, saying it highlights the country's "chronic disease" of racism, never mind that the Chinese state is currently holding more than a million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps.

Of course, states are not our allies. Thankfully, Americans are not in a situation where their state is using weaponry designed for inter-state conflict against protesting communities, rendering them more dependent on outside assistance to protect themselves from annihilation. Despite their declarations, at the end of the day states will work together to support state stability and crush any popular demands seen as too radical or threatening the existing order in a way they cannot themselves control. What is important is that people stand together, shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity against authoritarian regimes, police brutality, racism, patriarchy, and socioeconomic injustice. In this regard, the US protest movement has so far attracted the solidarity of people and communities across the globe. Free Syrians were not so fortunate. Through people-to-people solidarity we can exchange views, tactics, and experience of struggle. Having lived nine years and counting of revolutionary struggle, Syrians have a lot to offer to Americans in this regard. Together we are strong.

communities; and fought hard to defend their autonomy despite repeated attacks on these civil structures by both the regime and authoritarian Islamists.

The US, by contrast, is a democracy, and Trump was elected president. Given the grievances of a large section of the population, however, this is not a reason to oppose the current protests. People always have the right to challenge and change their leaders, elected or not.

Whether foreign states support or condemn a movement (or the state) will solely be based on their own interests

Many states rhetorically supported Syria's protest movement, but few gave practical support. The US itself, for example, issued many statements calling for Assad to go, but prevented the armed opposition from receiving the heavy weaponry it needed to defend communities from the aerial assault which was the main cause of Syria's destruction, massive death toll, and waves of displacement, and which could have changed the balance of power on the ground. The US's support was driven by a desire to force Assad to the negotiating table, rather than overthrow the regime. When Washington did eventually intervene militarily in Syria, it was only in the context of the "War on Terror" against ISIS. By contrast, foreign powers such as Russia and Iran gave significant military and diplomatic support to the regime. Russia's interest was likely determined primarily by a wish to provide a counter-balance to US interests in the region (rather than by any love for the Syrian regime), as well as to test out new weaponry on the Syrian people. Iran has always seen the Syrian regime as an ally providing a link between Tehran and Iran's client Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The state will slander a movement as extremist, while targeting progressives and letting extremism flourish

In Syria, peaceful protesters were smeared as "Islamist extremists." This tarring of the movement was used as justification for the state's escalation of violence and acts of repression, and aimed to justify its crackdown on the opposition to both internal and external audiences. At the same time as the state began rounding up thousands of peaceful pro-democracy protestors for probable death-by-torture, it released Islamist extremists from prison. Some of those released from state custody in 2011 and 2012 went on to form the most hard-line Islamist brigades, such as Zahran Alloush, the former head of Jaysh al-Islam; Hassan Abboud, the former head of Ahrar al-Sham; and numerous figures who became part of the leadership of the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as ISIS. Assad also encouraged acts of violence by *shabbiha* (sectarian regime-aligned militias) in order to galvanize a violent response from the opposition and encourage a spiral of violence, in which the state—being better-armed—would always have the upper hand.

In the US context, numerous videos have emerged of police targeting peaceful demonstrators with tear gas and arrest, as armed fascists roam the streets unmolested and appear to provoke acts of violence. Donald Trump has already declared the anti-fascist movement (ANTIFA) as the main threat, accusing it of responsibility for all acts of violence and looting, and announcing his intent to designate it a terrorist organization. Trump supporters and far-right groups are using tactics designed to instigate a violent response.

Democrats will always be the main threat to authoritarian regimes, as they embody the alternative. Framing the opposition as "terrorists" enables the state to justify an extreme crackdown on the opposition, portraying its actions as a security

response (a “War on Terror”) designed to re-establish stability. It further allows the state to dehumanize its opponents, to encourage support for their liquidation. Assad labeled Syrian protesters “germs;” Trump sees protesting Americans as “thugs.” The threat of violence will be used to try to deter people from protesting. Both Assad and Trump threatened to use the military to crush the movement (Assad followed through on his threat).

Opponents of the movement will accuse protesters of being outside-agitators or hirelings of foreign powers

Syrian revolutionaries have been denied all agency for instigating an uprising against a repressive regime. From the outset, the regime’s public response to the protests was framed by conspiracy theories. State media spoke of “infiltrators” and “armed gangs” causing chaos, and of “foreign powers” and “Salafist terrorists” inciting violence. In Assad’s first televised address to the People’s Assembly in response to the protests in March 2011, he warned that Syria’s “enemies work every day in an organized, systematic, and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria’s stability.” The Syrian state was cast as a victim, despite holding an absolute monopoly on violence. Over the years, both the regime and its supporters have stuck to this narrative. Syrian revolutionaries have been slandered as agents of the US, Israel, and the Gulf states, notwithstanding the absolute idiocy of the claim that the CIA could somehow mobilize hundreds of thousands of people from Qamishli to Daraa, or that Syrians would be content to have their children tortured to death until some clever white man told them to do something about it.

In the US, Minnesota’s governor Tim Walz has claimed that the majority of those looting and destroying property are

from outside the cities, bent on “attacking civil society” and “instilling fear.” Insinuations have also been made that the protest movement is supported or indeed instigated by Russia. On CNN, former National Security Advisor Susan Rice said, “I would not be surprised to learn that they have fomented some of these extremists on both sides using social media ... I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they are funding it in some way, shape, or form.”

In times of uprising conspiracy theories will flourish. They are meant to distract from the fact that there are real people involved with real grievances, and their aim is to support the state by discrediting the opposition. At some point the conspiracies will inevitably take on an anti-Semitic turn and lead back to George Soros and “the Jews.” Conspiracy theories may be spread by people formally seen as allies. The best way to guard against this is to listen to the voices of those directly involved in the movement on the ground and constantly check the accuracy of sources.

The legitimacy of government resides in the people

Syrians have been repeatedly told by outsiders that they should abandon their struggle, and accept being tortured, raped, gassed, bombed, and starved because Assad is the “legitimate” ruler of Syria. This is said despite the fact Assad has never once won a free and fair election, but rather inherited the dictatorship from his father. Indeed, holding elections was and remains the key demand of the opposition to the regime. Apparently, Syrians are not ready for democracy, and, should Assad fall, what would take his place would be worse than the current genocidal regime. Yet in areas liberated from the regime, Free Syrians held the first democratic elections in four decades; set up local councils to self-govern their