Response by a Syrian anarchist to the First of May statement on Syria

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I was delighted to see that, finally, an anarchist group in the global north has made a serious attempt to make sense of what's happening in Syria and clearly state its position on the Syrian revolution. I really like, and mostly agree with, the statements expressed in the 'Our Position' section at the end, but I have quite a few issues with the preceding introduction and background sections. So here are a few comments in the spirit of your invitation for "input from others, particularly those with greater background in the area, especially anarchists living in the region", and in the hope that this will contribute to a more informed discussion among anarchists and a better understanding, position and action on Syria.

Perspective and language

Before I start, I have to say I find the term "anarchist policy" rather weird. Since when do anarchists have policies or use this loaded, state-linked word? Wouldn't 'position' or 'perspective' be a better alternative?

The same goes for the use of "resolution" in "Syria, now in its third year of civil war with no sign of any resolution in sight." I will come back to the issue of describing what's happening in Syria as a 'civil war' later. For now, I just want to point out that the use of such words as 'policy' and 'resolution' would put off many anarchists – certainly myself – even if they are meant as a 'neutral' description of events. This is because such words might (rightly) be interpreted as give-aways of buying into or internalising a statist, realpolitik perspective that does not obviously fit in well with anarchism.

To illustrate my point, here is an example from the statement: "It is impossible to understand what is going on in Syria today without some knowledge of the international and historical context". I would have liked to see something like "local socio-political dynamics" listed among the factors, i.e. something that is related to people's agency, from a grassroots perspective, not just big geo-strategic considerations linked to foreign powers. I will have more to say on this thorny issue shortly.

The historical background(s)

I do not mean to be arrogant or dismissive, but I have to say I found your historical background rather poor and misinformed, brushing over complicated events and reducing them to simplistic, often mainstream versions, while omitting other important events or factors, and even getting some facts wrong. You do admit that "[you] are not experts on the history and current dynamics of Syria and of the Middle East as a whole." But spending so many lines trying to give a certain version of history does inevitably shape readers' understanding of what follows.

For example, the Iranian Shah was not simply "overthrown in 1979 and replaced by a Shiite theocratic government." For two years before then there had been a mass, diverse popular uprising that was eventually hijacked by Khomeini. Similarly, Hafez al-Assad did not become president of Syria through a normal "military coup" in 1971. It was an "internal coup" by the British-backed right-wing faction within the Ba'th party against the more left-wing faction backed by the French. And his son, Bashar, did not "stand for election, won, and was reelected in 2007." He was brought back from abroad after his father fell ill and his elder brother died and was appointed as president

by the ruling inner circle after the constitution was hastily changed so as to lower the minimum age for presidency candidates from 40 to 34, which was his age at the time.

On the history of the Syrian regime, Hafez al-Assad did not only "ruthlessly suppress" the Muslim Brothers in 1980. There were many other ruthless and bloody campaigns of repression against leftists as well, including the mass arrests, torture and killing of members of the Communist Labour League and other radical militant leftist groups – whose members, by the way, included many Alawites, Christians, Kurds, etc.

Finally, the 1973 "Yom Kippur War" between Syria, Egypt and other Arab countries on the one hand and Israel on the other, is known among Syrians and other Arabs as the October War and not the "Ramadan War". This is a minor point but is one of those give-aways about knowledge and perspective.

Imperialism, nationalism and Orientalism

You argue that US imperialism is "in retreat" following the 2008 economic crisis. Many would argue against drawing such a linear causal relationship, but my main issue here is that you then go on to explain pretty much everything, including the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions, through this global imperialism lens: "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."

As far as I understand, the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions were – broadly speaking – triggered by varying combinations of political repression, economic deprivation and social disintegration, which made people in those countries feel more and more marginalised, powerless, humiliated and undignified. Even if they are linked to the wider processes of global politics and economics – like everything else – these are specific local dynamics that cannot be simply seen as a direct result of imperialism and globalisation.

To be fair, you do touch on the "complex social process", though I would have liked to see more emphasis on the complexity of the socio-economic-political realities in each of those countries and the similarly complex agents and actors that participated in their recent uprisings and revolutions, not just the two loud, west-oriented voices that commentators in the west often focus on:

> 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.

I will come back later to lumping all the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings and revolutions together in one category and explaining them all using the same narrative or reasoning. For now, I just want to stress that this obsession with US and western imperialism is really redundant and unhelpful, especially when it edges on right-wing, west-centric theories of 'clash of civilisations':

> 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.

Which civilisations and cultures are you talking about? Which historic memories? Would *you* identify with mainstream western culture? (whatever that is). If not, why should *all* the people of the Middle East identify with one static culture or civilisation that hasn't apparently changed for centuries? And who said this identity has always remained anti-Western? What about the pro-western liberals and the globalised youth and middle classes you've just talked about? What about all the leftists, communists, anarchists and so on and so forth?

You might have guessed where I'm going with this. Even though I'm sure this was not your intention, such simplistic culturalist views are typical Orientalism based on a typical double exceptionalism: the exceptionalism, uniqueness and uniformity of the western or European civilisation, and therefore values, which is then contrasted with the rest of the world, which is made to either fit this liberal-democratic paradigm (often as inspired followers) or seen as abnormal, backward people who hate these values and represent the 'opposite' (anti-democratic, fundamentalists, etc.).

This Orientalist world view is also where ascribing too much agency to the west comes from, and it has been dominant in much of the commentary originating in the west on the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions, albeit in various different ways, ranging from seeing the whole thing as a western imperial conspiracy to overemphasising the role of (western) social media and (westernised) youth and liberals or (anti-western) Islamist fundamentalists.

The same can be said of how you present the process of nation-state building: "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."

Weren't the European nation-states also "artificial constructions" forced on the people living on those lands? Can you see the Orientalist exceptionalism implied in this sentence? I can see it very clearly:

> 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.

While it might be true that European nation states have had longer to consolidate, they were no less "rapid and haphazard" at the time. Read the history of Europe and the US in the 17th and 18th centuries, or just ask locals in different regions of France or Italy, or the Irish and Scots in Britain. I could go on and on but my point is simple: nation-states have often been violent, top-down, haphazard projects imposed on people, no matter where they are, in Europe or the Middle East, and whether their borders are drawn by external or internal colonial powers. Besides, the current states of the Middle East (apart from Israel) also had long histories of nation-building (cultural,

regional, Islamic, Arab, disintegration of empires, etc.) well before their current borders were drawn up by the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916. So they are not that arbitrary, at least from a nationalist point of view.

This is important because, based on these simplistic culturalist assumptions, you reach a similarly simplistic conclusion: "many of the states comprise what should be seen as 'imperialist imposed national identities'."

On the Western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism

Another Orientalist view that is so prevalent in the majority of news and commentary we have been reading on what's happening in the Middle East at the moment is to explain everything through a simplistic, and often imaginary, conflict between religious sects. You seem to do the same, even though your intentions are obviously different:

> 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.

There is no space here to discuss in detail the origins and development of sectarianism in the Middle East (starting with the French, British and Ottoman colonial powers' using the ethnic and religious minorities discourse and those minorities subscribing to, or using, that same discourse to appeal for protection). However, there are two important points to make here:

First, like anywhere else in the world, most people in the Middle East have multiple, co-existing identities – or identity markers, rather – that are invoked at different times in different contexts. For examples, nationalist identities and discourses were dominant in the 1930s and 40s, during and in the aftermath of independence from Britain and France; they were then extended to or replaced by pan-Arabist identities and discourses in the '50s and '60s; both sets of identities and discourses were challenged by Marxist and Islamist ones in the '70s and '80s and so on and so forth. All of these identity markers and discourses had, and still have, roots in social and ideological bases, and are today invoked by different social and political groups in the service of their political games and struggles.

Second, this western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism inevitably leads to a simplistic and reductionist understanding of complex regimes and societies like those of Syria:

> Despite this [pan-Arabist and ostensibly secular and socialist] 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.

Again, there is no space here to go into the differences between the Alawites and the Shi'ites (they are not the same and don't really approve of one another as religions) or into the sectarian composition of the Assad regime (it's not just Alawites; there were many Sunnis as well in the

inner circle, and some of the poorest and most heavily repressed communities were non-Ba'thist Alawites). It is important, however, to remember the following, often-ignored fact:

Since 1970, Hafez al-Assad and his regime skilfully used religious and ethnic sects and sectarianism – in Syria as well as in Lebanon – to consolidate their rule, fuelling sectarian tensions but keeping them under sufficient control so as to justify the 'need' for this rule, otherwise "things would get out of control and the country would descend into a civil war," as we were often warned. The term 'politics of sectarian tension' can probably describe this policy better than the cliché 'divide and rule'. To give you just a glimpse, Hafez al-Assad – and his son Bashar after him – always prayed in Sunni mosques, appeased Alawite religious and community leaders, while at the same time marketing itself as a 'secular' regime.

Here is another example from your statement of the western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism, to which everything else is reduced:

> 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.

You see, this is exactly what I'm talking about. The conflict between the Syrian and the Iraqi regimes and al-Assad's support for and by Iran were, and still are, purely political (i.e. power and influence games) and have nothing to do with sects and religions. Why is it so difficult to see that when it comes to the Middle East? Don't you think it would be really absurd if someone reduced the modern conflict of interests between France and Britain to rivalries between Catholicism and Protestantism?

The Syrian revolution

You claim that 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."

I don't know where you got this from – I guess from (mis)representations by western media and west-oriented accounts on social media, etc. – but what actually happened in Syria, as far as I know, was exactly the opposite. And that's, in fact, what distinguishes the Syrian revolution from the (first) Egyptian revolution, for example.

The mass protests in Syria started and remained, for quite a few months into the revolution, largely confined to marginalised, neglected regions and rural areas such as Dar'a, Idlib, Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, the poor suburbs and slums of Damascus, etc. Apart from a few, relatively small solidarity demonstrations, big urban centres (Damascus and Aleppo) did not 'move' on a mass scale for a while. This was partly due to the reluctance of urban middle classes to side with the revolution because they still believed the regime could overcome this 'crisis', so it was safer for their interests to stay on the regime's side or keep silent. In contrast, the marginalisation, negligence, deprivation and humiliation in the rural regions had reached such an extent that people living there did not have much more to lose. This, coupled with strong regional identities that made it easier for these people to break away from the regime's discourse, meant the Syrian

revolution was – at least in the beginning – an almost classic revolt by the marginalised rural poor.

To understand this, you have to understand how Bashar al-Assad's so-called 'modernisation' programme was implemented since 2000. Without going into too much detail, his economic liberalisation of the country, celebrated by the west as welcomed 'reforms', was carried out through a Mafia-like network of high ranking military and security officers partnering with big businessmen, which largely concentrated in and benefited the traditional bourgeois urban centres. Moreover, economic liberalisation was not accompanied by 'political liberalisation' that could have made these 'reforms' more acceptable by people – save for a brief period of political freedoms, known as the 'Damascus Spring' in 2000–1, which was soon heavily repressed as the regime feared too much freedom may destabilise its rule. So the picture is quite more complicated than the way you present it in your statement:

> 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.

The same goes for what you say about the original demands of the Syrian revolution: "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."

As far as I'm aware, the demands – or slogans, rather – were all about dignity, freedom and bread and against repression, which soon turned into demanding the fall of the regime altogether following heavy-handed repression and massacres against protesters. To understand this, you need to understand the nature of totalitarian regimes like the Syrian one, which so many commentators in the west seem to fail to really understand. When Syrians say 'down with the regime', they mean or imply political, economic and social injustices at the same time, because 'the regime' symbolises all these apparently different forms of injustice.

It is perhaps because of this failure to understand the nature of the Syrian regime that so many western commentators ascribe to the Syrian revolution 'demands' that reflect their own values and wishes rather than what Syrians themselves want and are struggling for – from traditional leftists claiming it's about jobs and workers' rights to liberals claiming it's about democracy. The same can be said of the (largely western) debate of violence vs. non-violence:

> 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 government 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.

It may be true that the regime's brutal response to the early protests pushed people to resort to arms to defend themselves, but this does not mean the Syrian revolution was ever peaceful or non-violent. When people say 'peaceful' in Arabic, they often mean 'unarmed' or 'non-militarised'. The word does not have the same loaded connotations it has in English and other European languages (pacifism and all that). Moreover, the militarisation of a popular revolution does not mean it has turned into a "civil war." We're really tired of people describing the Syrian revolution as a 'civil war'. And again, the war is between a repressive regime and repressed people, some of whom are now armed and fighting back. It is not between "the Alawite minority and the Sunni majority." There are many Syrian Alawites who support the revolution and many Syrian Sunnis who still support the regime. Please stop reducing everything to simplistic sectarian labels. Here is another example from your statement:

> 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.

Before its intervention in Syrian affairs (to support the regime and its forces that were losing ground), when it was still popular among many Syrians and Arabs as a resistance movement, Hizbullah was never worried about "the Sunni majority." Quite the opposite. Nor was the Syrian regime's support for Hizbullah ever linked to the fact that it is a Shi'ite religious movement. How do you explain the regime's support for Hamas, then? (that is, before Hamas' leadership decided to abandon the losing regime and leave Syria). But anyway, I've said enough about this issue (the western obsession with Middle Eastern sectarianism), so I won't repeat myself.

On foreign intervention

I also disagree with your analysis of why the US has been reluctant to support the Syrian rebels. A lot has been written about this issue and I do not really have the will or energy to go into it again now, especially when it's become clear now, following the chemical weapons deal with Russia, that the US is not willing to intervene in any serious way so as to bring down the Syrian regime and put an end to the conflict. I would, however, still like to make a couple of quick remarks.

I very much disagree that the US "almost always prefers to see very slow, very moderate, and very peaceful political change." The history of the US adventures and interventions in various different parts of the world testify to the very opposite: from Nicaragua, Panama and Guatemala, though Cambodia and Chile, Korea and Vietnam, to Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor is exactly true that the US is so worried about weapons falling in the hands of Islamist fundamentalists:

> 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.

Read the history of al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist militant groups and how they started and who initially supported and armed them – you will come across the US in each and every case.

Like many Syrians, I share your suspicions and concerns about the intentions and consequences of foreign (state) intervention in a popular revolution. But please remember that Syrians have already experienced western colonialism and know what it means, and that they have grown up with strong anti-imperialist discourses (leftist, pan-Arab nationalist and Islamist), probably more than any other country in the region. And please remember that people in Syria are not just 'revolutionaries'; many of them are also exhausted, scared, desperate and they want to live. That doesn't necessarily mean they are pro-US.

Having said that, please let us be realistic when we talk about armed struggles. If there were other, less dodgy sources of arms and other material support available, I can assure you that many Syrians fighting today would not have had to seek help from the US and the Gulf countries and to forge alliances with 'Islamist fundamentalists' actually fighting on the ground.

Speaking of Islamist fundamentalists, no one denies that al-Qaeda-linked or inspired groups fighting in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, whose members include many non-Syrians, are becoming stronger and getting out of control. But claims that the Syrian revolution has been (completely) hijacked by them are massively exaggerated. The most accurate estimates I've seen say radical Islamists do not constitute more than 15–20% of the so-called Free Syrian Army. All these two groups have been doing recently is to wait for other factions of the Free Army to do the fighting, then go to the 'liberated zones' and try to impose their control. Both groups' initial popularity – mostly due to their charity work – is declining among many Syrians as more and more reports of their repressive and sectarian practices come to light, not to mention reports that both groups are infiltrated by the regime and are now turning against the Free Army. Indeed, there have mass demonstrations *against* Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS in the areas under there control, such as al-Raqqa, parts of Aleppo and so on.

Your position

As I said in the beginning, I do like, and mostly agree with, your position(s) expressed towards the end of the statement. I would advise all my anarchist and activist friends and comrades to read it in full before reading these comments (and I'm happy to translate it into Arabic if no one else has done so already). But here are, nonetheless, some quick remarks to stir some more, hopefully useful, discussion.

I'm glad that you consider what's happening in Syria as "still being predominantly a popular revolution in which the majority of the Syrian people are fighting against an arbitrary dictatorship" and that, "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… [you] do not see the rebels as mere proxies for the imperialists, under their control and dependent on them financially." This is much better, and more sensible, than the majority of what we've heard from the 'left' in Europe and the US.

I slightly disagree, however, that "the leadership of the struggle in Syria is made up of a combination of pro-Western liberals, moderate Islamic organizations, and fundamentalist Islamic militias." This is because a crucial distinction has to be made between the opposition leadership

abroad, mainly the National Coalition, on the one hand and the Local Coordination Committees and the various factions of the Free Syrian Army fighting on the ground on the other.

I also disagree that, "increasingly, what is missing is the independent, self-organization of popular resistance" and that, "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." There have been many inspiring examples of non-hierarchical self-organisation and solidarity in Syria, Egypt and other countries in the region in the past couple of years. They might not pass a strict (western) anarchist or activist test and might be based on traditional social networks and structures, but are nonetheless inspiring and promising, and are worth studying and learning from.

Finally, and as I said before, we have to be realistic and serious when talking about armed struggles. You cannot "defend the rebels right to obtain weapons by any means necessary," then condemn them for their "reliance on the U.S., other Western powers, or the rich Gulf states" without identifying a realistic alternative (there is none at the moment, it seems). Asking the rebels to "demand arms with no strings attached" is not going to get us anywhere because there are no such arms (with no strings attached) in the real world. We all know that "the US/Western aim, obviously, is to control and limit the revolution." But couldn't anarchists adopt the same "tactical" approach that you advocate regarding fighting alongside the "bourgeois and fundamentalist rebel forces" in relation to the US and its allies? I guess before we even get to this question, we have to establish who is willing to take up arms and fight and for what ends.

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