

Revolution, Reaction, and Intervention in Syria

January 14, 2015

Joseph Daher is a member of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria. He is the writer and editor of Syria Freedom Forever, syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com, a blog dedicated to the struggle of the Syrian people in their uprising to overthrow the Assad authoritarian regime and to build a democratic, secular, socialist, anti-imperialist, and pro-resistance Syria. A Ph.D. student in Development, he works as an assistant at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. He was interviewed in Geneva on October 22, 2014, by New Politics board member Riad Azar, with some email updates. For additional questions on Kobanê and Turkey, see the New Politics website [here](#).

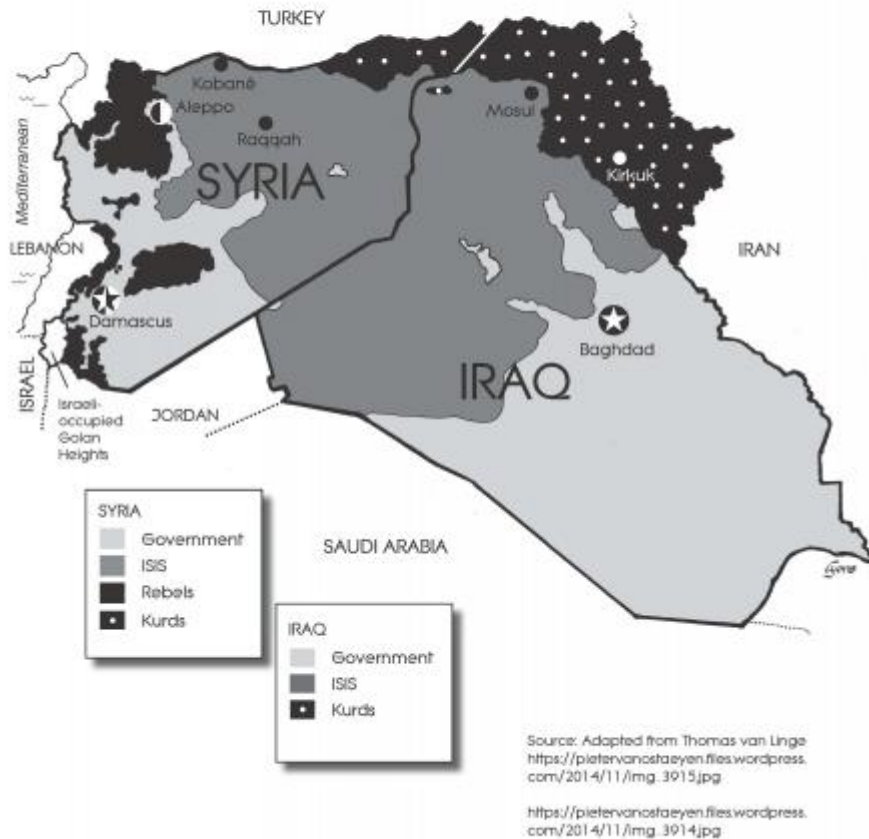
New Politics: Your writings give voice to those persons and groups who are often ignored in the international media's portrayal of the crisis in Syria. I would like to ask you some questions regarding the United States' recent entry into the battlefield and how you believe this will affect the various actors in the region.

The crisis in Syria is often painted as a conflict involving the Assad regime and the Islamic State (ISIS), with barely any mention of other players within the country. How do you understand the current state of Syria, taking into account all of the groups vying for power?

Joseph Daher: The dominant narrative, especially since 2012, has been to portray the Syrian revolutionary process as not a part of the other revolutionary processes in the region, for democracy, social justice, and equality. Instead the ongoing events in Syria have been seen as either a sectarian conflict between religious minorities against a religious majority, or through a geopolitical perspective where different imperialist and sub-imperialist states of the region oppose each other. This is especially the case with the so called "axis of resistance" argument, based on Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, with the support of Russia, opposing Western imperialism led by the United States and allied with the reactionary monarchies of the region: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This ignores the dynamics from below of the Syrian revolutionary process.

Both of these analyses are problematic because they ignore the deep and objective conditions of the Syrian revolutionary process, which are similar for all of the countries that went through—and are still going through—revolutionary processes. In short, the driving forces have been the desire for democracy, the socio-economic crisis, and a will for emancipation and liberation towards more equality.

Areas of control Syria and Iraq, November 2014



Firstly, remember that Syria was also an authoritarian regime, ruled for the past 40 years by one family, and it is also a bourgeois regime that went through a process of neoliberalization and privatization, accelerated considerably with Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power. Sixty percent of the population was living under or just above the poverty line in 2011. Syria was subjected to the same form of crony capitalism that is prevalent in the region. For example, in Egypt it was the Mubarak family that benefitted mostly from the privatization and neoliberalization; in Tunisia it was the Trabelsi family, of the wife of the dictator Ben Ali; and in Syria it is Makhoul, the cousin of Assad, who owns 60 percent of the country's wealth. In the end what we have are neoliberal and authoritarian systems, and Syria is no different in this regard.

Secondly, by saying it is all simply a conflict between ISIS and Assad, one ignores the popular movement that has been ongoing for the past three years despite the fact that the movement was undermined first by the regime and then by Islamic reactionary forces. However, this popular movement is not only still alive but it is still playing an important role. Members of this movement were the original actors of the revolution and are still upholding the objectives of the revolution.

Thirdly, the Assad/Islamic State dichotomy ignores the fact that the Assad regime helped the development of ISIS and all the Islamic reactionary forces, by releasing from the prisons of the regime the different individuals who would become the heads of these reactionary forces. In various amnesty decisions during the start of the revolutionary process, leaders of various Islamic

reactionary forces were freed, while democratic activists were imprisoned, tortured, and oppressed. We should realize that the Assad regime targeted and still targets mostly the democratic and progressive activists as well as the Free Syrian Army, while it allowed ISIS to grow.

The best example is the city of Raqqa, which was under the domination of ISIS since October 2013, and was only targeted for the first time by the regime at the end of August 2014. This is when ISIS gained a lot of territory in Iraq and when the U.S.-led coalition for bombing Iraq and Syria was organizing. And one must also not forget that the first to oppose ISIS and other Islamic reactionary forces was the popular movement. Since the beginning of 2013 in various areas there have been popular mobilizations and demonstrations to condemn the authoritarian practices of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front.

A popular uprising occurred in the beginning of 2014 in some neighborhoods of Aleppo and in northern areas of Syria against ISIS. ISIS was expelled militarily from several areas due to the pressure of the masses. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front also participated in these military fights against ISIS because of the opposition of the masses and the increasing defiance and violence of ISIS against them. We can see that the popular masses in Syria oppose those who don't uphold the objectives of the revolution and practice authoritarian policies.

Of course this does not mean in any way that Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front, or other Salafist forces, should be considered allies of the revolution for democracy, social justice, and equality; they are part of the counter-revolution. We have seen just recently that Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State cooperated in expelling the Syrian Revolutionaries Front from Rif Idlib and that Ahrar Sham (a Salafist group) has just attacked Free Syrian Army forces in a neighborhood of Aleppo called Bustan Qasr.

Finally, seeing the conflict as solely between Assad and ISIS actually serves no one but the regime and ISIS, and both alternatives are reactionary. In some ways it also serves Western imperialism, which wants to portray the conflict as choosing between the lesser of two evils. The Assad regime welcomed the U.S.-led coalition's bombardment, and supported "all international counterterrorism efforts." Assad wants to appear to the various international imperialist actors in the West as the person that can help them in their fight against "terrorism." This last perspective has unfortunately pushed many—from conservative right-wingers to ill-informed anti-imperialists—to take the view that Assad is a lesser evil than the Jihadists. In fact we should oppose both, because they nurture each other and are each seeking to establish an authoritarian system.

So definitely this view of seeing only a conflict between ISIS and Assad is negating the popular revolutionary process in Syria, and the strength of the popular movement. Even though it has been undermined, it is still present, still fighting, and still upholding the objectives of the revolution.

NP: What do you believe are the objectives of the U.S.-led airstrikes and arms supplies in Syria and Iraq?

JD: First, in Iraq, they serve to protect American allies. The U.S. military intervention, despite its "humanitarian" propaganda, is nevertheless part of established political objectives that are: to protect American diplomatic personnel stationed in Erbil (which is also home of a CIA base); to protect the large multinational companies in the hydrocarbon/oil sector such as Mobil, Chevron, Exxon, and Total who are exploiting the oil production in the region and have already invested more than \$10 billion; and, perhaps most importantly, to keep the alliance with the Iraqi regime, inherited from the American invasion. The United States did not intervene when Mosul fell and more than 200,000 refugees were on the road to Iraqi Kurdistan, but only got involved militarily when ISIS was threatening to conquer the Kurdish areas of the north and the capital Baghdad in the south.

That is why the United States only wanted cosmetic and superficial changes in the Iraqi regime, replacing only the prime minister, Maliki, who was also let down by his Iranian ally because of his catastrophic mismanagement of the country. The new prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, is far from representing any radical change. He is a close partner of Maliki and a member of the same party, Dawa. He was Minister of Communication in the interim government set up after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. This new Prime Minister, al-Abadi, has received international support including from Iran. Ex-prime minister Maliki has nevertheless tried to remain in power, but finally gave up. Following this announcement, American officials said that they could accelerate the economic and military aid to Iraq if the new government of al-Abadi were more inclusive, particularly towards the Sunni population of Iraq. But this forgets that it is the current political system of the Iraqi regime and the same political forces that have led Iraq into this situation today as I have explained in different articles on my website.

It is worth mentioning American assistance to the Iraqi army for those who doubt that this regime is an ally of the United States: the Pentagon has provided Iraq with \$650 million worth of ammunition and small arms this year alone. Before 2011, the United States had spent \$24 billion on arming and training the Iraqi army. Finally, on October 22, the United States declared that it was negotiating to sell \$600 million worth of armor-piercing tank rounds to Iraq.

The airstrikes in Syria are definitely not in favor of the Syrian revolution. Washington from the beginning claimed it would be targeting ISIS, but it has targeted other reactionary forces as well, such as Jabhat al-Nusra or forces linked to it. While we as members of the revolutionary-left current in Syria have opposed these reactionary forces, we also oppose this intervention in Syria because the objectives of the U.S.-led coalition are not to assist and help the Syrian revolutionaries or to protect them from ISIS or the regime. The objective is to reimpose their hegemony over the region and guarantee a form of stability, especially to the reactionary regimes of the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, by putting an end to the revolutionary processes.

These strikes are also in the framework of reaching a “Yemeni” solution, as was the goal since the beginning. In other words, reaching an agreement between the Assad regime (or a section of it) and the opposition linked to Western and Gulf regimes. The approval by the U.S. Congress of \$500 million to support President Obama’s plan to arm and equip 5,000-10,000 Syrian rebels, whom Washington describes as “moderate” in their fight against ISIS and Syrian regime forces, goes in the same direction, as we can see in the text of the resolution:

The Secretary of Defense is authorized, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for the following purposes:

1. Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL [another term for ISIS]), and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.
2. Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.
3. Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.

The desire of the United States to constitute armed groups in Syria loyal to their interests is nevertheless thwarted by the reality on the ground. This is because of the decision of a large majority of opposition groups to cooperate with Washington only if they are able to maintain their independence and autonomous decision making, and if the collaboration includes a clear plan for the

overthrow of the Assad regime. Colonel Riad al-Asaad, the leader of the Free Syrian Army, for example said he would not join the alliance against ISIS without a commitment to oust the Syrian regime. He added, "If they want to see the Free Syrian Army on their side, they should give assurances on toppling the Assad regime and on a plan including revolutionary principles." Other armed groups present in the Supreme Military Council of Syria, close to Washington, also expressed their resentment of the United States and other Western forces for their lack of support. They said that coalition airstrikes against ISIS targets were not enough; the strikes must also hit Assad's forces. One of the commanders said that "we need to deal with this problem at its root cause: Assad, the gangs that support him, and Daech [an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State]. Those are the three problems every Syrian deals with." Many armed groups were also critical of the way the strikes were being carried out and many inside the country on the side of the revolution reject these bombings.

The jihadi and Islamic reactionary forces are used by the Western imperialist and regional forces as the entry point for this new military intervention. At the same time, the expansion of the jihadi groups, which has ignored state borders and created instability, has reached the point where it is threatening Western and regional imperialist interests. We should remember that ISIS, which was established in 2006, was of no interest to these powers when they were confined to specific geographic locations in Iraq and later Syria. They were even financially supported by some Gulf private networks in the beginning. Although ISIS and other sister organizations are a factor of instability for the global imperialist system, we should be clear they are in no ways actors for the emancipation and liberation of the people of the region; they are very much the opposite. At the same time, the bombings from the U.S.-led coalition have killed civilians and destroyed much-needed civilian infrastructure.

These are the reasons we should oppose these bombings. Airstrikes by U.S.-led forces have killed more than 32 civilians during the first month of bombing in Syria, according to official data. At the same time the Assad regime has continued its war against the population and combatants of the Free Syrian Army in the "liberated" areas. Thus, Assad's siege of Aleppo is almost complete. He has made significant progress in the countryside of Damascus (Al Ghouta) and has bombed on a daily basis the Al Wa'ar neighborhood in Homs for the last two weeks. This has elicited the complete silence of the media.

In addition, to believe that ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other similar organizations can be defeated with the same tools that created them is completely insane. These reactionary forces are indeed the consequences of the criminal authoritarian regimes (for example Assad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq) and foreign interventions (mainly Western countries led by the United States and regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran). This new military intervention has indeed no objective of overthrowing the Assad regime. As a banner held by a Syrian protester in Aleppo last week said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, Albert Einstein," and below, "Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003, Syria 2014." The only political groups that will benefit from these bombings are the two sides of the counter-revolution: the Assad regime on one side, and on the other the reactionary Islamic and jihadi political forces.

The Assad regime will most probably benefit in the short term militarily, with the weakening of strong military actors. Assad's forces have actually continued their attacks on various areas of the country, but in addition the regime sees a chance to regain "legitimacy" with the West as part of an alliance in the War against Terrorism.

The bombing will likely militarily weaken in the short term ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other reactionary forces, but will most likely prove counterproductive for the Syrian revolutionaries by increasing the popular support for the jihadi fighters, driving even more recruits to their ranks.

These forces are already painting themselves as the only serious anti-imperialist movement, rather than the reactionary and sectarian outfit they are. Several reports have already noted that these bombings have boosted the appeal of these organizations, with new recruits arriving every day. There is also competition between the organizations; for example, Jabhat al-Nusra must further radicalize its discourse to prevent the departure of its members, especially foreigners, to ISIS. Following the bombing of their positions in Idlib, some members have claimed their willingness and readiness to fight alongside ISIS.

Further, when we look at the example of Kobanê, this intervention can really be questioned by studying its consequences on the ground; in particular it has been unable to stop the offensive of ISIS. Let's remember that when the U.S.-led coalition intervened in Syria in mid-September, ISIS was 60 kilometres away from Kobanê. Today ISIS—even though the U.S. started bombarding—is occupying half of the city. This tells us that this new intervention is not at all helping the revolution, and is more propaganda than anything. Lastly, we can see who supports this U.S.-led coalition: Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the centers of counter-revolution in the region.

This intervention is in the interests of Western imperialism and also those of the different sub- and international-imperialist forces. You can see that Russia is not really opposing this kind of bombardment, although there's criticism of the way it is led. The same with Iran; it criticizes the way it is led but does not directly oppose these bombings. All of these actors want some form of stability, which was challenged by the revolutionary processes that began in 2010.

When the United States says it is targeting ISIS, we have to remember that ISIS grew out of al-Qaeda, which was present since 2005 in Iraq. When ISIS expanded, especially by intervening in the Syrian revolutionary process, it was not a problem for Western imperialism and other sub-imperialist forces. But when the expansion of ISIS became too powerful for them to ignore, they chose to intervene at this moment. So it is the level of expansion of ISIS that was a problem for the United States, not the fact that ISIS is a reactionary force. When ISIS was not directly challenging Western political interests, and the forces of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the latter nations even supported it financially before 2011, and even after.

NP: Journalist Jeremy Scahill has recently said in an interview that the idea that ISIS is made up of strictly ultra-orthodox Islamists is false. He claims that figures such as Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a prominent Ba'athist, are also a part of it. Do you agree?

JD: One must understand that the fall of Mosul was due to two factors. First of all it was due to the corruption and the complete unpopularity of the Iraqi state, because of its sectarianism and authoritarianism, which is why the army and police forces left so rapidly. Second, it was a coalition that took over Mosul, led first of all by ISIS, but composed also of Sunni tribes and former Ba'athists. However, directly after the takeover and occupation of Mosul, ISIS became the dominant force and eliminated the other forces, including tribes and the Ba'athists, and al-Douri as well. So it's not right to say that al-Douri is part of ISIS; he's not.

At the same time, you have former Ba'athist military commanders that became jihadists and Salafists after the American invasion, and only after joined forces with al-Qaeda and later ISIS. So, yes, the military leadership of ISIS is composed mainly of former Iraqi military commanders from the Iraqi army.

NP: What is the state of the Free Syrian Army militarily? After losing territory to Assad's forces, and the rapid growth of ISIS, do they still have a chance?

JD: First we need to understand that the Free Syrian Army is not a single and united institution, but

rather a network of independent military groups fighting under its umbrella. The various forces of the Free Syrian Army have been increasingly and considerably weakened over the past two years, because unlike its opponents it has not been supported significantly by any international forces either by direct military intervention or by supplies of advanced weaponry. It has lost a lot of ground to the Assad regime, which concentrated its offensive against them, and also to the growth of Islamic reactionary forces, not only ISIS but Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic front as well, which attacked and killed commanders of the Free Syrian Army.

Nevertheless, before the U.S.-led coalition intervened, there was a new form, a new growth of some factions of the Free Syrian Army, of people coming back to the idea and appeal of a Free Syrian Army defending the objectives of the revolution. These people were disappointed with the Islamic reactionary forces. The reason people had joined those forces was not based on ideology most of the time, but due to the fact that the jihadi groups were well funded and received arms from the reactionary monarchies of the region, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and with Turkey closing its eyes to the passage of jihadi forces into northern Syria. But people are coming back. More and more, we have seen in the past weeks demonstrations with slogans saying, "We need to go back to the spirit and objectives of the revolution," and various forces of the Free Syrian Army were building on this kind of popular mobilization. On a military basis the democratic components of the Free Syrian Army represent the will of the people, the popular movement. You still have a lot of slogans and songs for the Free Syrian Army, so it's still a power, but it lacks any kind of unity. There are still a lot of problems. There are still regional differences in the Free Syrian Army. By unity I mean, not a unity in objectives, but rather in military strategy to defeat the regime and the Islamic reactionary forces. They have been fighting on both fronts: against the regime for the past three years, and against Islamic reactionary forces increasingly for more than one year. But nevertheless, they still have a chance because for many people on the ground, for the popular classes, the Free Syrian Army really represents the armed hand of the revolution.

The democratic components of the Free Syrian Army still protect the objectives of the revolution. This is why we can increasingly see people going back to the Free Syrian Army with a discourse that is more democratic, some even acknowledging that they were wrong to collaborate with the Islamic reactionary forces. However in some regions you still have collaboration between Islamic reactionary forces and the Free Syrian Army, depending on the situation. But this is tactical cooperation; they do not share the same political objectives. This is important to clarify.

NP: Does the group still have political legitimacy? Are there any prospects for governing the country?

JD: Definitely, among the popular masses in support of the revolutionary process in Syria.

NP: What is the role of the revolutionary left in the Middle East and North Africa today in combating both the reactionary religious orthodoxy of jihadists and authoritarian dictatorships?

JD: The duty of the revolutionary left is to understand first of all that the solution is regional and cannot be based on only one country. We have to clearly oppose any form of counter-revolution, whether it is branded as Assad or el-Sisi. Or in Tunis as modernism, unity of the nation. All this kind of propaganda, "fighting against terrorism," we have to oppose very strongly. But we have to oppose as well the Islamic reactionary forces whose rhetoric speaks of the unity of the Umma, authenticity, and moralism, when in fact they share the counter-revolutionary goal of implementing neoliberalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, sectarianism, and forms of nationalist-chauvinism. This is why we oppose both of them, and both of them are linked to different imperialist and sub-imperialist forces.

We need to build an alternative that is from below, a radical alternative that is democratic, in favor

of social justice, and opposed to sectarianism, patriarchy, and nationalism. This means first that we need to build mass revolutionary socialist organizations, with clear principles, building collectives. And also at the same time we need to build a large democratic front that opposes counter-revolutionary forces, which is not only based on socialist revolutionaries but all the forces that share our objectives of democracy, social justice, and equality. This is the duty of the left. We must oppose using sectarianism to divide the people, especially now when we see the different authoritarian regimes or Islamic reactionary forces. We must understand that sectarianism is not a heritage from a medieval past but rather a modern phenomenon, which is used by dominant forces to divide the people.

NP: How do you envision an end to the conflict?

JD: I would prefer the term “solution to the revolutionary process,” which is not going to come tomorrow. We need to think in terms of a long-term revolutionary process, because right now the situation in Syria is catastrophic, where you have half of the population displaced, 80 percent of the people now living close to the poverty line, total destruction of urban infrastructure, and two counter-revolutionary forces that are still strong: the Assad regime and the jihadi groups. A solution is only possible with crushing both of these forces and building an alternative that is democratic, in favor of social justice, against sectarianism and chauvinism, and for equality. This means building revolutionary organizations and re-empowering the popular movement that is still battling, with both material and intangible weapons.

We should support the sending of arms without any political conditions to the democratic forces of the Free Syrian Army, and the Kurdish popular forces as well, to defeat both sides of the counter-revolution. I would like to urge those who don't think arms should be provided to read Trotsky's text *Learn to Think*. Arms without any kind of political condition! If the West were really in favor of the revolutionary process in the region, it would provide arms. Its failure to do so shows the contradictions of Western imperialism. It does not want to strengthen a large popular movement that is democratic and in favor of social justice and against sectarianism. This is the way to build a new Syria.

But also without forgetting that the solution is not only in Syria, the solution is regional. If you don't overthrow the centers of the counter-revolution, which are Saudi Arabia and Qatar, a decent future for the region will be very difficult. Likewise, the Syrian revolutionary process will also need to challenge the Israeli state and help the Palestinian resistance. Israel is not only a threat to the Palestinians, but as we've seen throughout the decades, it is also a threat to the region as a whole. On many occasions since its establishment, Israel has intervened in the region to serve imperialist political interests, not only in Palestine. Lastly, any kind of people who are serious about helping Kurdish self-determination should help the Syrian revolutionary process, because they are directly linked.

NP: Do you believe that the growth of ISIS represents a failure of the left?

JD: I think that the growth of ISIS is not directly linked to the defeat of the left, because the defeat of the left is much older. It goes back to the 1970s, with the crushing of the left by authoritarian regimes. We should also remind ourselves of the position of the Stalinist left that allied itself with authoritarian regimes, which was destructive for the left. For example in Egypt, where the Communist Party supported Mubarak until the last day, even before the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and supported el-Sisi. This is terrible because then people ask, “Is this the left?” Or in Syria where we see a section of the left supporting the regime, and participating in the government. Or in Iraq, a section of the left was with Saddam. So it is the crushing of the left in the 1960s and 1970s in addition to the opportunism of sections of the Stalinist left allied with authoritarian regimes

that caused the defeat of the left.

At the same time, following the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, oil prices increased considerably, which allowed the Gulf monarchies to increase support to the Islamic reactionary forces in various countries, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1970s, for example in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was funded by the Gulf monarchies while being used by Sadat to crush the left. The Muslim Brotherhood was also successful because it presented itself to the people as an alternative. Nationalist forces were defeated in 1967, and became mostly corrupted and authoritarian. They also went back on their social policies, starting the "infitah" policies, increasing neoliberal policies, and creating a highly unequal society, while the left was crushed and repressed.

On top of that, there was the defeat of the Palestinian resistance in Jordan and Lebanon, in the former during Black September in the 1970s and in the latter during the Lebanese civil war at the hands of both the Syrian regime and Israel. This also crushed sections of the left that were allied with the Palestinian resistance. Finally, there have been the attempts by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to co-opt the Palestinian movement. So the Palestinian resistance has been attacked on all fronts.

This is why we say the liberation of Palestine requires the overthrow of all the regimes in the region. Arafat, on the other hand, played a bad role, saying that Palestinians shouldn't intervene in Arab states. This was very appealing to Fatah, which was playing to the different reactionary regimes, and was funded by them. Unfortunately, most of the Palestinian organizations follow this policy today. This is true of Hamas, which for example opposed the Bahraini revolution on sectarian and political grounds, and of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which has not taken any radical position in favor of the Syrian revolutionary process.

ISIS is a direct consequence of the American invasion and destruction of the Iraqi state and society. Contrary to what has been suggested by some media and so-called "analysts," the current events in Iraq are not the result of an ancestral hatred between Sunnis and Shiites that goes back hundreds of years, but truly are the result of contemporary policies.

In addition to the military invasion that came after more than a decade of inhumane sanctions, killing a million Iraqis and causing the forced displacement of four million people, the U.S. occupation policies are at the origin of the current debacle. These include fierce repression of any political opposition to the U.S. occupation, implementation of neoliberal policies and repression of the independent trade union movement, destruction of state institutions (military, public administration, university system, and so on), and the establishment of a political system based on political sectarianism as in Lebanon. The last-mentioned element was one of the main reasons for the terrible sectarian war between Shia extremist groups and Sunnis between 2005 and 2008, resulting in a monthly average of 3,000 dead.

As I said before, some former officers of the Iraqi military joined ISIS after the American invasion. ISIS also finds its roots in the sectarianism of the Iraqi state led by Hizb al-Dawa, Maliki's political party. Dawa was an ally of the Iranian regime, but also collaborated with the United States, and it became an ally of sorts, collaborating politically and, as we saw previously, militarily. This does not mean that the previous regime before 2003 was ever good; it must be remembered that the country was under the bloody dictatorship of Saddam Hussein's clan which caused the death, exile, and imprisonment of huge numbers of people, not to mention the gassing of Kurds in Halabja in 1988. This regime was built on a totalitarian repressive apparatus that accepted no political opposition or independent trade unions, and on a clientelist tribal and sectarian basis.

We should also not forget that the rise of ISIS is linked to the repression of the popular protests that

shook Iraq in early 2011 in the wake of other popular uprisings in the region. They started on February 25, 2011 with a “Day of Wrath,” which then launched a weekly cycle of protests on Fridays in most major cities. Demands were diverse, ranging from the fight against unemployment, which is still very high, to condemnation of the lack or absence of services such as electricity, the release of political prisoners, and opposition to the whole sectarian political system established by the U.S. occupation. The movement was made up of members of civil society, women’s groups, trade unionists, and so on.

Popular gatherings sometimes exceeded tens of thousands, while for example in the city of Mosul, protesters called for a general strike pushing the local governor, Atheel al-Nujaifi to support the popular protests and support the violation of the curfew imposed by the government. Popular demonstrations represented a serious challenge to Maliki’s government, with many local politicians resigning, including two in the city of Basra. Above all, the public squares where protests took place became politicized poetry sites and areas of cultural performances drawing on Iraq’s rich cultural heritage.

The government was quick to react with systematic repression, using tear gas and live ammunition and the establishment of numerous checkpoints—forcing people to walk for hours in the scorching heat to reach public squares that were usually easily accessible. Security forces also forbade all pens, markers, poster board, and bottles of water to people going to public squares to protest. Political consolidation within the ruling elite of Iraq nevertheless allowed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to co-opt local dissident politicians, as in Basra, while continuing the repression of the popular movement.

This Iraqi sectarian regime oppressed Sunnis and fired many of them from government positions, including the high command of the army. Maliki refused to integrate the “Sunni awakening” councils, which had fought al-Qaeda, into the army. He maintained the anti-Ba’athist law, established after the U.S. invasion against former leaders close to Saddam Hussein but which was mainly used by the Iraqi prime minister to suppress all Sunni political forces, while accusing leading Sunni politicians of supporting terrorism. This is a typical tool of repressive regimes in the region to suppress any opposition, as is seen in Egypt and Syria today.

In 2013, a popular movement in the Sunni-majority areas led a mass campaign of non-violent resistance against Maliki’s government, and particularly its sectarian and authoritarian policies. Popular mass demonstrations and sit-ins were held in this period demanding the release of political prisoners, especially thousands of female prisoners, more jobs and better public services, and the replacement of the Iraqi constitution. The protesters especially opposed the “anti-terrorist laws” used by the Iraqi government to suppress opposition members with accusations of links with al-Qaeda or the Ba’ath Party. At that time, leaders of the Iraqi Shiite group of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and of Moqtada al-Sadr’s movement, who had their own grievances against the Maliki regime, expressed their solidarity with the protests organized almost entirely by Iraqi Sunnis, and threatened to organize their own demonstrations. Unfortunately, no trans-confessional solidarity materialized, nor inter-ethnic, despite Kurdish criticism of and opposition to the Maliki government.

The Maliki regime bloodily suppressed the popular protests, as it did the movement of February 25, 2011, when Iraq had earlier witnessed countrywide protests. The government also used tactics taken directly from the U.S. occupation: districts wholly or partially destroyed, mass arrests, and torture. Iraq has also been the battleground for the different sub-imperialist states in the region: Iran supporting the Iraqi sectarian regime under Maliki and other reactionary Shia militias and groups, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar supporting Islamic reactionary Sunni forces, including ISIS.

Finally, what allowed ISIS to grow considerably was the beginning of the Syrian revolutionary

process, and the intervention of ISIS in this process, where it gained military experience. It also was able, through the occupation of different oil facilities in Iraq and Syria, to build an independent military economy. (ISIS is no longer dependent on foreign funding, which has been mostly stopped by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.) So all these elements enabled ISIS to grow considerably.

The solution is of course to oppose the jihadi reactionary forces of ISIS, but also to oppose the Maliki government with its sectarian and authoritarian policies and reactionary forces that support it. These two actors feed each other and have to be overthrown and defeated in order to have any hope of building a progressive popular movement opposing sectarianism, enabling Iraq to end a nightmare that has lasted too long.