The problem with leftist myths about Syria

written by Loubna Mrie | March 16, 2018

Why are voices on the left still justifying the Syrian regime's indiscriminate bombardment of Eastern Ghouta?

As the death toll in the Damascus' suburb of Eastern Ghouta reached nearly 700 in two weeks and continues to rise, many so-called progressive voices continue to justify the carnage.

Many are dead convinced that the regime is fighting al-Qaeda in Eastern Ghouta, which is using civilians as human shields – hence the hundreds of dead are not really the regime's fault.

A great number of leftists in the West and the East have been buying into regime propaganda for years now. From Australian academic Tim Anderson, who's claimed that Bashar al-Assad has not been involved in mass killings of civilians and was simply demonised by the imperial West to British and US journalists Robert Fisk and Seymour Hersh who have claimed the regime did not use chemical weapons in various attacks on civilians, leftist public figures continue to believe that the Assad dictatorship is a bastion of anti-imperialism in the region and needs to be supported.

They refuse to accept that over 500,000 people have been killed in the war, the vast majority by the regime, which, unlike the rebels, possesses, and uses indiscriminately, airpower (including the notoriously destructive barrel bombs dropped from helicopters).

Though there are historical reasons for these misconceptions by large sections of the left, in the middle of the current atrocious destruction and loss of life in Syria, they are simply inexcusable.

For me, it is unfathomable how people who have stood up for social justice and human rights across the world remain in support of a regime that has exploited its population economically and tortured and killed innocent civilians in the most horrendous ways possible. Or how people who had seen through US imperial war propaganda cannot see through the Russian equivalent of it.

Since I fled Syria in 2014, I have heard two common leftist myths about what is going on in my country. I want to address both of them below.

It's a regime change plot against a legitimate government.

Many people who didn't follow Syria back in 2011 and 2012 might not realise that the current conflict started with a true uprising in the country.

In March 2011, Syrians, including myself, joined the Arab Spring, and we had every reason to.

We dreamt of political and socioeconomic change, fair elections, and a state that respects us and our rights. And no one can tell us, especially no one from the "free world", that our revolt was not justified.

The current president, Bashar Al-Assad, came to power in 2000. No, not through elections or even consultations with parties or consensus of community and religious leaders. He simply "inherited the throne" from his father, Hafez, after his death.

Hafez, too, was unelected: He came to power in 1970 in a military coup.

Syrians my age, and the three generations older than me, never voted in their adult lives. The only thing I ever voted in was Arab Idol.

The Syria of my childhood was a repressive police state. I grew up believing that the walls had ears and that you couldn't criticise the regime, even in your own house.

In schools, we were brainwashed daily. I attended Baathist schools, where the president's portrait adorned every wall. During the flag salute every morning, we called for the immortality of Hafez al-Assad before heading to class. We memorised songs praising him and the Baathist Party, we had to recite his speeches. He was our leader and father. When Hafez died in 2000, I was 9 years old. I cried because the person who I'd always been told was immortal had died like a normal human.

The country belonged to the Assad family. You could not do business without going through them. Assad's relatives and close associates had direct control over all import licenses and government contracts.

Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, is the richest man in Syria. Makhlouf controls the major mobile phone company, TV channels, pro-government newspapers and used to control the oil and gas industry of the country before the war.

Before 2011, no political activities were allowed, to the extent that even attending political meetings could get you jailed and tortured for years. After the brief "Damascus spring" in the early 2000s, where we dared to hope things would change under Bashar, and the subsequent crackdown, we realised he will be just like his father.

Only, he turned out to be worse.

So in March 2011, when we saw Tunisians and Egyptians rising up and toppling their dictators, we thought we could also demand change. Despite all the institutionalised repression and propaganda, Syrians still took the risk and went out into the streets. People of all walks of life and background joined the protests – Christian, Druze, Muslim, Sunni, Alawite, Ismaili, Palestinians, Circassians, etc, young and old men and women demanded change.

We knew that the price for change would be high, but we had no idea it would be this high. Protesters were shot dead with live ammunition. I lost many of my friends, I was shot at. I witnessed people getting shot in the back by snipers and the police. People started disappearing en masse, never to come back; some turned up dead after arrests. And it was at that moment that Bashar lost whatever little legitimacy he might have had as a dictator.

So no, this is not a regime change imposed by the West. This is an uprising against an illegitimate dictator. We had and still have every reason to demand change.

We couldn't care less where the US stood on our struggle. Regime change when it's demanded by people, who suffered under authoritarianism, is legitimate. That various powers, like the US and its allies in the Gulf and Turkey, have gotten involved in the conflict (and in fact, militarised it) does not delegitimise our struggle. And we expect international leftist movements to support us, not ignore or mock us.

The jihadis are hiding in Ghouta. The Syrian regime is fighting them.

Like in any chaotic conflict, radicalisation found fertile ground in the Syrian struggle. When people are exposed to tremendous pressure and injustice, tragically some will become radicalised.

The fact that there are some who took a more radical path in the past seven years, doesn't mean that everyone who is anti-Assad is also a terrorist.

In Syria – in Ghouta in particular – we have armed groups like Jaish-al Islam and Failaq al Rahman, Ahrar al-Sham, Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (which has a very small presence, despite what Assad might have you believe) and others – all of which have committed violations and human rights abuses.

However, this doesn't mean that Ghouta is populated by terrorists. Plenty of Syrians, not only in Ghouta but also across rebel-held areas, have stood their ground and resisted extremism and oppression from all sides. A good example are the activists Razan Zeytouneh and Samira al-Khalil, who were documenting violations on all sides in Eastern Ghouta, for which they were threatened both by the regime and armed groups in the area. They were abducted in December 2013 and have not been seen since then; their families have held Jaish al-Islam responsible.

So yes, there have been violations by the armed groups, and yes, they have also shelled civilian areas in Damascus. But by looking at the abuses of only one side, you are missing the point: first, the general population in Eastern Ghouta – which suffers the most – is not fighting; two, the regime is killing on a massive scale. Shelling by rebels killed 64 civilians in February in the whole of Syria, while regime bombardment killed 852. The regime, too, has arrested, forcibly disappeared, tortured and executed tens of thousands of people.

And the Russian accusations that the armed groups are holding civilians back as human shields sound all too familiar. Every time the Israelis bombs Gaza, they slip into the same narrative; those 1,500 civilians who died in the summer of 2014 were also all "human shields victims". The US, too, said the same about the nearly 1,000 people who lost their lives during the offensive on Raqqa.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the US and Israel have all been involved in this conflict, but so have Russia and Iran. Rebel groups have killed civilians, and so has the regime – on a massive scale, too. You cannot condemn the crimes of one side without condemning the crimes of the other and still think you are a proponent of justice.

Loubna Mrie is a Syrian photojournalist and writer. She has been covering the conflict in East Aleppo and Idlib and other parts of Syria. She's currently seeking asylum in the US and finishing her MA in Middle Eastern Studies at NYU.

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