Syria and the Left

written by Yusef Khalil, Yasser Munif | January 31, 2017

Behind the humanitarian disaster of the Syrian civil war is a political crisis the Left urgently needs to understand.

The Syrian tragedy is a key moral and political question today. Yet it has not been easy for leftists around the world to decide where they stand on Syria.

To illuminate the history and nature of the Syrian conflict, Yusef Khalil for *Jacobin* conducted an extensive interview with Yasser Munif, a Syrian scholar who studies grassroots movements in the country. The wide-ranging discussion that follows focuses on such core issues as the character of the Assad regime; the roots and development of the Syrian revolution, and the various opposition groups active there; regional and global interests and interventions; and the tasks and responsibilities of US solidarity.

The United Nations has called Syria the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. More than eleven million Syrians, which is more than half of the Syrian population, are displaced. Hundreds of thousands have streamed to Europe, with thousands drowning in the sea because of Europe's border and asylum policies. We have 4.8 million refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and neighboring countries, and 6.6 million are internally displaced inside Syria. More than half of those refugees are children. Are these refugees simply victims of a humanitarian crisis? What are they fleeing, and what experiences do they carry with them?

Obviously in addition to being a humanitarian crisis, it's also a political crisis. We can't understand the refugee question without connecting it to the Syrian conflict and Syrian revolution. As such, we need to connect it to the recent history of Syria and the political process over there.

That's one of the main problems. The people who have been working with the refugees oftentimes disconnect the refugee question from the larger Syrian conflict. They, for the most part, have an ahistorical, apolitical take on the refugees. They view them simply as individuals who need help and support. I think that's unproductive. I think that the refugee question is an extension to the Syrian revolution. It's a byproduct and should be understood in that larger context of the Syrian revolution and should be politicized.

Many of the activists and organizers who were supporting the grassroots movement in Syria ended up going to Turkey and neighboring countries in Europe because of the scale of the violence, the displacement, the political isolation, and so on. They're an extension to that revolution, and many of them are still operating in Europe, and are, in a way, an organic part of that revolution. That's the

first problem. The idea that it's simply a humanitarian crisis that needs to be resolved as such, I think, is very problematic.

The second question is the way that the refugees, Syrian or otherwise, are perceived as individuals with individual needs. I think that's also a major problem. Instead, I think we need to think about those refugees as communities who have political rights and have cultures that need to be preserved and cherished. Instead, oftentimes, they are dispersed in different villages and cities in European countries. The reason why they're doing that is they're thinking that by dispersing those populations, they will avoid a high concentration of Muslims, and potential threats to Europe, and terrorism, and so on. That's the second problem, the idea they're thought of as individuals rather than communities.

Thirdly, initially, there was a lot of solidarity with the refugees, but later on, when there were several terrorist attacks in Europe and then also in the United States, the public opinion changed, and many Europeans and many Westerners in general became very skeptical of the refugees. Many of them perceive them as potential terrorists. That also is another issue that needs to be addressed.

That's also feeding into the right-wing, Nazi, xenophobic politics that is producing a binary between Europe and the Syrian region, as if there is a clash of civilizations between those "barbarian" Arabs, potential "terrorists," and so on, and, on the other hand, Western culture and Christian values. There is no in between. It's perceived as a clash of civilizations, and there is no resolution but complete separation between those two populations.

Whether in Europe or here in the United States, the way that the refugee question is deployed in the political field feeds into those very racist and xenophobic discourses. That also needs to be criticized, especially by the Left and the progressive groups and parties. We should fight for the integration of the refugees. They should be given rights like European Westerners, and they should be treated as communities.

You mentioned the necessity to connect the refugee issue with recent history. How would you characterize the Syrian regime and its developments so we can get a better picture of what's been happening?

The Syrian regime has a long history, at least four decades. It's a totalitarian, sectarian, and, more recently, neoliberal regime. Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current dictator, seized power in 1970 and isolated the radical segment of the Ba'ath Party back then, the group that was led by Salah Jadid. Since then, he began his process of the de-radicalization of the Ba'ath Party.

Initially, the Ba'ath Party had support from part of the middle class, and peasants, and socially marginalized groups, and was opposed to the landowners, but that initial politics started withering away. Instead, Hafez al-Assad started pushing for a more conservative politics. All the nationalism and anticolonialism of the 1960s and '70s became part of the background, and instead, Assad started introducing more deregulation in the economy.

The economy was obviously more centralized in the beginning, and some people perceived that as a form of socialist economy with a large public sector and so on. All these different elements were dismantled by the father and then by the son, Bashar al-Assad, and starting in the mid-1990s, there was a push for more private sectors, and private capital; the dismantling of some of the public sectors, the end of the subsidies, and, more and more, private universities, and so on. That's usually perceived as the neoliberal turn in Syria.

There is a combination of a totalitarian police state that basically monitors any kind of political

action or activity. Politics is obviously outlawed. Unions were completely repressed and dismantled back in the 1980s, when there were several strikes in 1980–81. Instead, those leaders were put in prison and many of them fled the country. The Assad regime put Ba'ath members instead to lead those unions. There were no political spaces in Syria for at least several decades.

It's also a sectarian regime. It uses two different discourses. In public, it presents itself as secular, as non-religious, as inclusive, and so on, and yet, it's at the same time operating a very sectarian discourse. I think that's very important because oftentimes that's misunderstood. Some people believe that the Assad regime is actually a socialist, anti-imperialist power in the region. That's not very accurate if we look at the long history of Syria.

How secular is the Syrian state? What does secularism under Assad look like?

I think that the Syrian regime was very smart in projecting the image that it's modern and secular and against sectarianism, inclusive. As we know, there are different sects and religions in Syria. They were all living together and sharing the political space, but that's far from truth.

Assad actually built a very subtle balance between Sunnis and Alawites, and the party and the army, very early on to consolidate his power. Obviously, he couldn't do it only by getting support from the Alawites, so he needed the support of the Sunnis. He did that by giving some positions to certain generals and merchants and so on, but every time there were confrontations and at every purge, the Alawites were doing better off, and were getting more strategic positions within the army, the security apparatus, and within the party. The Assad regime played on these contradictions by also pushing for opposition between the urban Sunni class and the rural Sunni class and the Sunnis from different regions, playing on all these contradictions and differences to consolidate his power.

When there was a confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, the Syrian regime crushed the rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood and killed some twenty to forty thousand people in Hama, depending on different estimates. To undermine the power of the Muslim Brotherhood, it allowed some Saudi sheikhs to open religious schools and propagate their Wahhabi ideologies among the population in the 1980s. It did that with the approval of Saudi Arabia, as long as Saudi Arabia agreed to not support the Muslim Brotherhood. It was playing on all these different contradictions and deploying sectarian discourses among certain segments of the population while at the same time presenting itself as a secular and modern regime or power. I think that's important.

That's still ongoing, by the way, this kind of double discourse. That's confusing many people who believe or see only the sectarian aspect or only the secular aspect, depending on your political affiliation and what you want to see, but both these discourses are being deployed by the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime is using sectarianism not as an ideological apparatus, but rather a pragmatic tool; to pit one part of the population against another and consolidate its power, rather than using sectarianism like ISIS does, as a foundation of its state.

Assad's supporters also claim that there's a high degree of unity among all sections of Syrian society behind their president, and some of them say behind their "democratically elected" president, against the foreign invasion of their country. What is Assad's base of support? What does that look like?

Assad does have some support. I think it would be inaccurate to deny that, but the Assad regime has been using a combination of hegemony and force to consolidate its power, so part of the population fears the Assad regime. Thus, they're not willing to protest or to join the rebellion because of the possible consequences. As I mentioned earlier, the Assad regime used a number of different strategies to split the population between urban and rural, between the middle class and the poor

who live in informal settlements, and so on and so forth.

Using those different contradictions, and pitting different populations against each other, and using sectarianism to pit, for example, Christians and Jews against others, the Assad regime was able to pacify part of the population and send a dual message. Part of the population fears the Assad regime, and therefore is unwilling to join the protests and unwilling to support the revolution. This is perceived as support because they're the silent majority. They don't support, but they can't really oppose the Syrian regime with its security apparatus and its army deployed in the urban space and so on.

Part of the population believes, and some of the minorities believe, that the Syrian regime is the only protector and that it's the least-worst scenario or option for them, that the other options are much more cruel. Therefore, they're willing to stay silent and not oppose the Syrian regime. I think there's also a large segment of such minorities, and so the regime has played that card of protecting the minorities. That plays well in the West. Whenever you are protecting, between quotation marks, the "Christian" or any minority, it's perceived as a good thing, because the Sunnis are obviously perceived as a threat. That's part of the Orientalist imagination. Sunnis are the majority, and therefore, they're by definition a threat to minorities.

Some parts of the population benefit from what is happening, or they're not really affected by what is happening. There are some wealthy neighborhoods that are completely disconnected from the current conflict and the violence. They don't see it. The Syrian regime was also very smart in avoiding any kind of confrontation in those neighborhoods. Usually, it was much more ambivalent and, as I said, unwilling to use force in those neighborhoods, to avoid any confrontation or alienation of the population.

I would say that it's a combination of hegemony and force on the one hand, but there is a small segment of the population . . . Many of the Alawites believe that if Assad is toppled, there is a direct threat that they might be displaced or they might be under threat by the Sunni majority. I don't believe that it has a solid base. I think it's just playing on the contradictions and the differences to consolidate his power.

Then what are the underlying causes which led to the revolution against the regime?

There are a number of reasons, obviously, but the most important one is forty-plus years of dictatorship. I think that it's a combination of internal reasons related to dictatorship, a dictatorship that reached its limits, and then also original and global reasons.

The domestic or internal reasons have been very well and amply documented. The Ba'ath Party used to have a nationalist ideology and opposed imperialism back in the 1960s and '70s, but later on, very quickly, it turned into a much more moderate party, tried to de-radicalize and reverse many of the progressive goals of the old Ba'ath Party that were implemented in 1963 up until 1970.

I think the main symbol of the new era is Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, who really is a symbol of corruption and the new wave of neoliberalism in Syria. Some people have mentioned that the drought of 2007 and 2010 played a role in splitting part of the population, and marginalizing part of the peasant class, and pushing part of that population into the outskirts of the large cities, and forming those belts of misery. I think that's a reason, but I don't think it's a major reason.

In addition to those internal reasons, I think it's important to connect the Syrian revolt to the larger context of the Arab revolts. We cannot understand the Syrian uprising without connecting it to this larger Arab uprising or revolt. I think in many ways it is the end of a totalitarian order in the region.

The totalitarian order reached its limits and is not able to survive or go on for much longer. It has become, in a way, obsolete and is facing major challenges. In many ways, it's the end of the totalitarian order, similar to the way that the socialist bloc or the socialist order ended in the 1990s. It's a structural dismantling of that order.

That doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to have democracies in the region. We might have a new version of that totalitarian, more militarized order, but what we used to have for thirty or forty years, depending on the country, after decolonization cannot survive anymore. We are basically at a new conjuncture, starting a new era in the region. Syria is connected to that organically. It cannot be separated from that regional process, and therefore should be understood within that larger context.

Finally, there is the global-economic-crisis context. I think that generated a number of protests worldwide, and the Arab protests are part of those global protests. Not to necessarily imply a direct or deterministic linkage between the economy and the political, but there is definitely some connection between the two. The neoliberal policies in the region and in Syria had major repercussions. The economic crisis, obviously, and the food crisis, before that, had also major repercussions in the Arab world in general but also in Syria. It's a combination of all these different forces that basically led to the revolution.

How should we understand the current conflict in Syria? Is it a revolution? Some call it a civil war. Others call it an international proxy war. How should we understand it, and why is a major focus of the Syrian revolution aimed very specifically at the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad?

I would start by saying that there are two different dimensions of the Syrian crisis. I think the first one is an extremely complex conflict with multiple ramifications, and the second one is a simple situation. I think we need to engage with those two dimensions at the same time.

The simplicity of the Syrian situation is that there was a popular national revolt that opposed a totalitarian regime, as I mentioned earlier. That is true in the entire Arab region. That is the key to understanding what is happening in Syria. I think that is actually the entry point to understanding what's happening in Syria. Then there is obviously a lot of complexity and confusion, but I don't think we can really understand the Syrian conflict without understanding that the origin of the rebellion is the opposition to the Syrian president and the Syrian regime.

The Syrian regime obviously, like all the Arab regimes, knew that it couldn't oppose a peaceful, popular uprising for very long. It had to muddy the waters in a way by creating some kind of confusion. It did that deliberately and very early on. This is why it confronted the peaceful protest with force. If the Syrian regime was opposing the rebellion only on the ground of peaceful protest and reforms and demands, I think it would have lost the battle long ago, and so it deployed a number of different strategies to create that confusion.

One of them, it very early pushed for militarization. It created geographical violence. It did that by killing peaceful protesters for months and months and months. Several thousand protesters were killed before there was a militarization of the Syrian uprising. I think that's important. People didn't choose to oppose the Syrian regime with weapons.

Actually, most who supported the revolution were convinced that if it turned into a militarized uprising, they would lose. I was one of those. I think many of us changed our position by realizing that militarization was not optional; it was the only way that people could defend themselves against the violence of the Syrian regime who was unwilling to back down and agree on any kind of even

simple reform.

The second tool it used is the Islamization of the uprising and the revolt by incarcerating and imprisoning the secular segments of the revolt, and torturing them, and killing many of them. Those were perceived as the main threat for the Syrian regime. On the other hand, as it has been said many times, the Syrian regime released many Islamists from its prisons in 2011, 2012. Many of those became major leaders in the main jihadist groups, including Ahrar Ash-sham's leaders, and Jaysh al-Islam's leaders, and many of Al Qaeda's leaders, and so on and so forth. Obviously, the Syrian regime would be more comfortable crushing a jihadist, Islamist opposition than a secular, popular, national opposition.

The third element that it used is sectarianization by basically attacking Sunni villages and Shi'a villages, and making sure that there was no coming together or alliances, although those were happening in the beginning. That was obviously a main threat for the Syrian regime, and so it made a lot of effort to implement a fracture between Sunnis and Shi'as and Christians and make sure that no alliances were possible.

Those who were also targeted are the Alawites who supported the Syrian revolt. They were opposed with a lot of violence, oftentimes killed, incarcerated. Some of them are still in prison because they supported the Syrian revolt. They were perceived as a main threat for the regime because it didn't want any kind of opposition within the Alawite sect.

Finally, I think it pushed for internationalization by inviting Iran and Russia and others to play a role in what's happening, and as such, inciting others, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to play a major role in backing different groups in the opposition. I think it's the combination of those two factors: on the one hand, undermining and erasing the popular protest, making sure that it becomes invisible by besieging that revolt, and silencing those voices, and by pushing for those different strategies that also undermine the Syrian revolt and are part of the counterrevolution.

It's a war of different narratives, as Gilbert Achcar has suggested. Discourse is a battleground, and we have to perceive it as such. It's not simply a representation of what is happening; it's a battleground. This is why it's important to push for the revolutionary grassroots narrative that has been completely isolated, silenced, marginalized, and, for many, unthinkable. This is why, I think, we should highlight that struggle and make sure that people hear about it.

Some on the Left have said we need to stop the demonization of Bashar al-Assad. I just wanted to go back to the previous question, about why is a major focus of the Syrian revolution directed at Bashar al-Assad specifically?

The Assad regime is basically revolving, and has been built, around the cult of personality. The dictatorship in Egypt is very different from Syria. Dictatorship in Egypt is institutional. As we have seen, after Abdel Nasser, there was Sadat, and then after that there was Mubarak, and so on. It's a dictatorial institution that doesn't necessarily rely on a family or an individual or a sect, unlike in Syria where the entire system is built around a sect and a family and the individual.

As such, he has become a major symbol against which protesters were opposed. It's not clear why part of the Left is unwilling to understand the anatomy of the Syrian regime, how the Syrian regime is in many ways revolving around this figure, the father figure, around which many of the slogans, ideology, and the graffiti in the streets also revolve.

In many ways, if Bashar al-Assad is toppled, I think it's fair to say the regime will not necessarily survive for very long, because it's built in a way that makes it almost impossible to separate the head

from the rest. Unlike in other countries, as I said, in Egypt, where there are institutions that allow for the replacement of the dictator, as we have seen with Sisi replacing Mubarak and preserving the entire dictatorship, I don't think such a scenario is possible. I think this is why it's very difficult to replace Assad and keep the dictatorship in Syria. That's why the international community and whomever is sponsoring Assad was not able to find a replacement of the Assad regime.

You've visited the liberated areas of Syria and you've witnessed the self-organization of ordinary Syrians. Can you tell us more about how people organized themselves during the initial protests, and also how they organized after the regime was forced to withdraw its repressive apparatus from large swaths of Syria?

Yeah. I spent several months in Syria, mostly in Manbij, back in 2013 and 2014. I was there during, I think, an important period for Manbij. It was several months after the liberation of the city. The city was liberated peacefully, without any infighting within the city, but the demonstrations were very, very large, and the security and the police and the state apparatus felt threatened and they fled from the city. With them, a lot of the public employees also fled from the city. The city was left without resources, without expertise.

It's a quite large city in the Syrian context. It has around two hundred thousand inhabitants with another additional two hundred thousand internally displaced. That's a population of almost half a million. The revolutionaries were basically trying to create institutions, political institutions and economic institutions, to make their city livable. It was, on the one hand, a form of decolonial politics, decolonizing the spaces that were previously occupied by the Syrian regime, and also decolonizing culture and institutions and the minds.

That's what I perceived and witnessed in Syria. It's a process of getting rid of the old culture, and acquiring a new decolonial politics, and rethinking politics and activism and organizing in different ways. People were able to create democratic spaces to a certain extent. I don't want to make it an ideal space. There were obviously problems, but in many ways, what people were able to achieve was quite incredible, despite the lack of resources.

They were able to create a revolutionary council and a revolutionary court. They created one of the first labor unions in the country, a free and independent labor union. It had, I think, around a thousand members. They were rebuilding the city from the bottom up, because many of them didn't necessarily have the expertise. Many of the public employees and public officers left the city because they felt that they were threatened. They were able to keep some of them, but many also left, and so with that, they also lost a lot of the expertise that is needed to run the water company, and the grain silos, and so on and so forth. They were creating or recreating all these different spaces.

That was happening in the context of mass violence. The Syrian regime was bombarding those areas frequently to undermine the emergence of any alternatives, because the Syrian regime feels that the emergence of an alternative Syria, a democratic Syria, a post-Assad Syria, would send the wrong message to those who still support it and would be the beginning of the end. The Syrian regime feels more threatened by those democratic alternatives than the military dimensions of the Syrian revolution. In many ways, those experiences and those experiments in those liberated areas were making the Syrian revolution possible. They were the backbone of the Syrian revolution.

They were laboratories where people were experimenting all sorts of things, creating new media, new culture, new discourses, experimenting with new ways of organizing because they were organizing in a very different context. Some of them were researching, organizing, and so on, and they were finding literature on Europe and other places. That's not very useful in the context of Syria, and so in many ways they had to reinvent many of those strategies and tactics that they could

deploy in Syria, in the context of war, of insecurity, of torture, of exchange of information and taking risks as you're doing that, smuggling goods in besieged areas, smuggling medication. Doctors were taking a lot of risks doing that, sometimes crossing ten, fifteen checkpoints to make sure that they provide equipment and medication to those besieged areas. Obviously, if you're stopped with that kind of equipment or medication, chances are that you're going to be tortured and killed as a doctor.

People still are taking those risks and supporting the revolution in those ways, but in many ways, those voices are invisible. They are not necessarily visible for the Western audience because they're speaking a language that's not simply Arabic, but an organizing language, which is not necessarily understandable to an audience that is trained in Western politics and Western spaces. I think this is also part of the confusion. People are not able to discern and perceive those incredible grassroots projects that have been going on, and still are, in Syria because of that disconnect, because of, I would say, a clash of cultures or misunderstanding.

People in Syria need to do that kind of translation to the foreign audience, the international and Western audience, but also people in the West need to educate themselves and try to go beyond the simplistic, orientalist narrative about Muslims and being pious or secular, because many of those binaries do not operate and don't have the same significance in Syria.

In Syria, most of the population is pious and is Muslim, and so asking that population to be secular in the way that some Western countries are is not realistic and is not what is happening in Syria. As long as people are not willing to transcend those orientalist binaries and make an effort to understand those processes, I think they won't be able to understand the magnitude and the importance of the Syrian revolution.

What still exists of those structures of self-organization today, whether in Manbij or in other parts of Syria?

Manbij was taken by ISIS shortly after I left in 2014, early 2014, but even during that period of occupation, people were organizing and they were protesting. ISIS was actually scared of that organizing and were threatened by the population. People were able to organize a major strike during the ISIS period.

Now, the city has been liberated from ISIS. It's under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), but even in the ISIS areas or the Syrian regime areas, people are organizing. They do all sorts of things. Part of that organizing is happening actually underground. People have hospitals underground. They have schools underground. They even have playgrounds. They organize activities for kids, painting and other kinds of activities. Obviously, no one is willing to send their kids to play in a park anymore, and so they're creating those spaces underground. There is an entire life underground. There is that kind of work that is happening.

The revolutionary council and the local councils still exist. There are more than three hundred of them. They're all over the spectrum. Some of them are very secular, others are very close to some of the jihadist groups, some of them are independent, others are much less so, and so on. Some of them have much more funding; others are very poor, but they're still there. Those revolutionary councils were started very early on in 2012.

The initial thinking was very much the work of Omar Aziz, one of the important Syrian intellectuals who was tortured and died in prison back in 2013; he is one of the people who inspired this idea of local organizing, because in many cases, those areas are disconnected. Some people like to talk about village republics because, in many ways, you have to organize yourself in a way to operate at that local level and provide to the population at that local level, to deal with the fact that you are

either besieged or it's too difficult to transport goods from one area to another.

That's been one of the challenges of organizing at that micro level. The micro politics, or the way that micro politics is operating, oftentimes faces those kinds of challenges: how do we operate at a larger scale when there are different groups controlling different areas? There were conflicts obviously in the past, but more and more, people are able to synchronize and collaborate and operate together, but that's a major challenge.

When you have a centralized power in the state, it's very easy to manage the different regions. When you don't have that centralized power, it's good in some ways, but it also has repercussions. One of them is the lack of exchange or cooperation between the different regions, but people are still very much active and working. The number of radios that have been created, the number of newspapers and magazines that are operating and are covering the situation in Syria, the street theater, what is happening also in the Syrian camps because that is also an extension to the Syrian revolt . . .

I don't think we should perceive the Syrian revolution as simply what is happening within Syria as a nation-state. I think it's more productive to look also at what's happening in the refugee camps and the different diasporic Syrian communities that are dispersed throughout. Those are also spaces where people are creating different ways to back and support the Syrian revolution in different ways by fundraising, by raising awareness, by communicating information, by building pressure on different governments, and so on and so forth.

Some claim that both the opposition and the people in the liberated and non-regime areas are terrorists and jihadis. How do you respond to that characterization?

I think that's very inaccurate. I think that the jihadists have a megaphone, and they make themselves heard. They have different social media with large followers, so their voice is heard. That is very different from the situation on the ground. There is a whole spectrum of different forces on the ground that go from the more secular and progressive to the jihadists.

At the same time, I think there is an important distinction to be made. There are several different groups. There are the global jihadists, and that includes ISIS and Al Qaeda. Those global jihadists are not necessarily interested in overthrowing the Syrian regime as such but rather in establishing their own state, the caliphate. Their objectives transcend the Syrian nation.

Then there are the national jihadists. Those national jihadists are also on a spectrum. Some of them are more sectarian or more jihadist than others. Many of them and even the most radical including Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham have made it clear in several statements that they support a national democratic transition and that people will be able to choose their own representatives. Their goal is to overthrow the Syrian regime. After that, they are willing to enter the political arena. This is very different from globalist groups who have connections and goals that transcend Syria.

Then there are many Free Syrian Army groups. The Free Syrian Army is a very heterogeneous umbrella term that includes a number of different subgroups that also have different ideologies. Many of them have much more secular or moderate kind of politics.

Many Syrians actually support the Free Syrian Army. The Free Syrian Army has become almost a slogan in many cases that people use against the jihadists. In certain regions you might see a protest, people protesting against Al-Nusra and people repeating slogans about the Free Syrian Army, if they don't exist in that region. That's the popular sentiment in most of those Syrian regions.

We know now that there is tremendous opposition to ISIS. People have been fighting ISIS since day one, since its emergence back in 2012, 2013 actually. They have been doing that in a number of

different ways. There is a pious culture in Syria, and people are more or less pious. That's also the culture in the region. The leftist parties have been completely decimated and destroyed by the Assad regime and by Arab dictators in general.

The political spaces have been destroyed and disappeared. In many cases, the mosque and political Islam was the only arena where people could express some form of social or political discourse or discontent. That is why many people are expressing their revolt and opposition to the Syrian regime in using that kind of Muslim or Islamic discourse. That doesn't mean that this is sectarian discourse or a discourse that wants to exterminate the other. In many cases, that is an inclusive discourse that is not opposed to any minorities, but people are more or less pious. They have demonstrated in many cases that they are going to oppose the violence and the authoritarian rule of jihadist groups whether that is Al Qaeda, or Ahrar al-Sham, or Jaysh al-Islam, or ISIS.

I think if we are not able to transcend that orientalist discourse that perceives any form of Islamic language as jihadist, then I don't think we can really understand the situation in Syria. People express and deploy their political ideologies using Islam because that is the language and that is the culture. That doesn't mean that it's a sectarian or totalitarian kind of ideology. I think we need to transcend the orientalist discourses in order to understand the depth and the geography of the opposition in Syria.

You spoke about the civilian councils, and you've also spoken about the armed groups. What is the relationship between those two? There were calls from Darayya early on to coordinate the work of the civilian wing and the armed wing of the movement. How successful were those attempts?

That is really contextual. It depends on the region. Some groups were more successful than others. It also depends on whether ISIS or Al Qaeda were prominent or were controlling some of those regions. In many cases, if there is a powerful armed group, those councils oftentimes lose their independence. They become just an auxiliary or an extension to that armed group.

If only small armed groups are present in the region, there is a much more symbiotic relationship between the civilian council and the armed groups. They complement each other, and oftentimes the civilian council asks the armed group to be outside the city, and to operate at the front, and avoid any kind of activity within the city, and so on and so forth.

I think we have to look at specific cases to really assess the situation. In some regions the armed groups were protecting the civilian council and were in a way dependent on the council. In other places they were coercive, and hegemonic, and subjugating the civilian council.

There are, as I said, more than three hundred civilian councils or revolutionary councils. In many cases, there is a very healthy and collaborative kind of relationship. In other cases, it's a failure, and the civil council or the local council is completely dependent or lacks any kind of autonomy.

The Kurds appear to have the most progressive platform among the plethora of actors on the ground in Syria. How do we understand their achievements in Rojava and what is their relationship to the revolution, the regime, Turkey, the United States, and also to each other?

The Rojava experiment has obviously some progressive aspects and it's been implementing some form of horizontal politics in the Kurdish Region in northern Syria and it has been implementing and trying to build networks based on local politics. Women play a major role in those regions. They're experimenting with autonomy and self-determination and new ideas and I think it definitely has

some positive aspects.

However, the main issue with that experiment is that the PYD is hegemonic in the region and has crushed any form of opposition. Back in 2011 and 2012, it was opposed to the Kurdish grassroots movement that supported the revolution. There are even reports about the PYD being involved in the assassination of Mashaal Tammo, one of the important intellectual leaders in that region and beyond. It also marginalized all Kurdish parties that were not part of or approved completely its policies. Most recently, they burned the headquarters of a political party and exiled many of the politicians in Hasakeh, Qamishlo, and other places.

That's the main problem. The PYD is really hegemonic in the region and doesn't allow for any form of opposition or negotiation and monopolizes the decision-making. I think it's important to differentiate and avoid any kind of conflation between the PYD as a political party and the Kurdish population who have legitimate demands and have been struggling for autonomy and self-determination for a long period and struggle against Arab chauvinism. All these demands are obviously legitimate and Syrian Arabs and others should support those legitimate demands.

The main problem is with the PYD and the kind of alliances it built with the Russians and the Syrian regime. It's not always explicit. Oftentimes, it's an implicit alliance with the Syrian regime and an avoidance of any kind of confrontation between the Syrian regime and the PYD. The main agreement is that those regions are kept outside the confrontation zone. The Syrian regime doesn't bomb them. There is no state violence and the Kurds will not oppose the Syrian regime directly.

Because of that, the PYD has been opposed to the Syrian revolt or the revolution and has been denigrating it and oftentimes portraying it in very negative terms. Often they talk about the Syrian revolt in a chauvinistic and orientalist way especially when they are in the West. They have a tendency to represent the revolution as violent, as led by jihadists, that Syrian women are oppressed, they play no role, have no role in the Syrian uprising and so on and so forth, basically using mainstream orientalist cliché against the Syrian revolution to avoid supporting it and avoid any confrontation with the Syrian regime.

The Syrian regime is willing to give them some room or some autonomy because of that kind of position. That's the main problem with the Kurdish issue, but they have obviously legitimate demands and we should oppose the Turkish war against civilians in the Kurdish region in Syria or in Turkey.

How do we understand the genesis of ISIS and who is responsible for its emergence and growth? The Syrian government, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the American-led coalition are all ostensibly fighting against ISIS so how has it survived?

Obviously, ISIS has different and several genealogies. I think we should trace its emergence back to the confrontation in Afghanistan between Russia and the United States and the flow of mujahideen from the Arab Afghans, as they were called back then, from the Gulf and from other regions to Afghanistan.

Back then, they were obviously supported by the United States and that's not a controversial history. There is plenty of documentation of how the United States and Saudi Arabia funded and supported the struggle of the mujahideen. They used to call them the "freedom fighters." They were very efficient in undermining the Russian presence in Afghanistan. Obviously, they were instrumental in undermining the Soviets and were in a way instrumental in the downfall of the Soviet Union.

That's the first origin of ISIS which is the precedent of Al Qaeda. The other dimension is Arab

dictatorship in the region. Arab dictators have suppressed any kind of political opposition, prevented the emergence of political parties, and exiled any kind of political figures or put them in prison, tortured them, oftentimes killed them. The only spaces that were available for people to have any kind of meaningful political discussion were the mosques and other similar spaces.

The Syrian regime and other Arab regimes have opened some spaces to Salafis and Sufis as long as they didn't interfere in political matters. They were allowed to have their own schools and their own clinics and so on and so forth and they were operating in Syria and they were quite hegemonic. The Syrian regime has used the Salafis to undermine the power of the Muslim Brotherhood. That dimension of Arab dictatorship is also foundational in any kind of understanding of ISIS, which is composed of the different Salafi groups in the Arab region.

There is also the issue of the Wahhabi ideology of the Saudis. The Saudis have been exporting the Wahhabi ideology to the entire region and beyond and they're able to do that because of their wealth and the oil in the region. They were able to also undermine the Left in the Arab region which was perceived as a major threat to Saudi and US interests and so the West was not opposed to that Saudi project. The Saudi were becoming more or less hegemonic. They were in a way opposing Abdel Nasser and Arab nationalism and progressive parties and communism by funding schools and universities and scholars through this Wahhabi ideology.

So I think it's the combination of all these factors in addition to the marginalization and poverty of major segments of the populations in Syria and Iraq. Finally, there's the Iraq War and the US invasion of Iraq which is the most direct reason for the emergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq and after that, ISIS. I think we should put ISIS in that kind of lateral framework and understand it as the result of those multiple genealogies.

For the second part of the question, yes Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, the United States, and others are fighting ISIS but in many regards, there's a lot of avoidance. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime avoided the direct fight against ISIS until at least 2015. From the perspective of the Syrian regime, ISIS was very useful for undermining the Syrian revolution, stopping the momentum of the uprising, and turning the revolution into a jihadist war between a secular regime and that fundamentalist terrorist group, ISIS. They gave those two options to the West and presented the conflict as terrorists versus the Syrian regime. The West had to choose the lesser evil with that being the Syrian regime.

In a way, Russia and Iran have been using the same kind of strategy, avoiding any kind of confrontation with ISIS as long as it wasn't necessary or as long as ISIS was not attacking directly. Only more recently they've been fighting ISIS just for PR reasons, to tell the world that they are in a war with ISIS, but there was no real confrontation with ISIS until 2015. Most of the fighting against ISIS was actually done by the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian opposition and more recently by the Kurds.

What would it take to ultimately defeat ISIS and its reactionary ideology? Is Assad really the lesser evil to ISIS?

I think that there is no way to defeat ISIS and other similar jihadist groups unless Assad is removed from power, unless Assad is defeated. This is true for the entire region and the kind of organic relationship between Arab dictatorship and those jihadist groups. In a way, they are complementary. They need each other and they feed off of each other. Those jihadist groups or fundamentalists can't be defeated as long as we have Arab dictators in power.

In many ways, Arab dictators have been, as I suggested earlier, using political Islam and Salafism to

solidify their rule and making sure that this potential threat from the Islamists is always present in order to send a signal to minorities but also to secular and people who are opposed to Salafi or Al Qaeda that the only way to prevent those groups from taking power are Arab dictators.

I think the entry point to defeating ISIS and Al Qaeda in the region is by toppling Arab dictators but also opposing any kind of foreign intervention, Western or Russian, in the region because those jihadist groups oftentimes justify their wars and their struggle by showing that there is foreign intervention, that the West is fighting Muslims, that there is Western threat, and so on. If there was no foreign intervention or Arab dictatorship, I don't think that those groups could really operate. They need the chaos. They need marginalization, poverty, dictatorship, lack of political spaces, to operate and function. Without that, they wouldn't get much momentum or power.

What do you think are the kind of social movements locally, regionally, and internationally which are necessary to defeat these counterrevolutionary forces, from ISIS to the dictatorships, and to realize the democracy that the Arab mobilizations of 2011 aspired to?

Obviously, we need progressive social movements, grassroots movements that understand the nature of the Arab uprisings and be able to understand the anatomy of the Arab regimes; the way they're built and the kind of alliances they were able to produce, and build a strategy to oppose them. They have to operate on several fronts. On the one hand, they need to produce more or less a horizontal kind of politics that is democratic, that takes into consideration the different segments of the population that doesn't marginalize any group whether ethnic or religious, and also oppose the US interests and other powers in the region.

You had mentioned the foreign intervention so let's switch to the regional and global players that are in Syria. We know that the Syrian Army has been unable to recruit enough troops to fight on its behalf and instead, it's relying on the Russian Air Force, on Iranian military forces, Hezbollah units, and the Shia militias from Iraq and elsewhere. How essential are these forces for the regime's survival?

I think there are two major reasons the Syrian regime relies on foreign fighters. The first one, as I mentioned before, is the Syrian regime pushing for an internationalization of the conflict, to incite a foreign intervention. By inviting Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and Iran and Russia to take part in the Syrian conflict, they were also inciting other states and regions to play a major role, and they were successful in doing that.

Also, the Syrian regime, especially since 2012 or 2013, needed those foreign troops and foreign forces. The Syrian Army was overstretched and exhausted and was fighting on different fronts. Initially, it invited the Iraqi militias and Hezbollah to come to Syria and protect the Shia holy sites but that was just a pretext. Later on, those forces played a more important role and Iran was orchestrating the entire show.

It's not clear how many militia members are fighting but according to different estimations, there are between twenty to thirty thousand Iraqi, Afghani, and Hezbollah militia members; in addition to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, plus the Syrian Army and the Russians who became much more directly involved in September 2015.

Twice in the past five years, the Syrian regime was about to fall. In 2013, when Hezbollah and the Iranians played a major role especially in the battle in Qusayr, and that's when Hezbollah was explicitly involved in the battles. Then the second time is when Assad gave a very defeatist speech in the summer of 2015 and the Russians felt an urge to be much more involved and started a campaign of aerial bombing.

Since then, it has been extremely violent in Aleppo and Idlib and other regions. So they are essential. It's not simply the militia members but also the funding and the equipment and the weapons that Iran and the Russians are providing to the Syrian regime. Without which, I don't think it can really last for long.

What are Russia's interests in Syria? Assad supporters in the West insist that Russian intervention in Syria is legitimate under the UN charter because they were invited by the Syrian government.

The Syrian regime is illegitimate. It's a dictatorship. It's a terrorist state not necessarily in the Western sense but terrorist in the sense that it's been terrorizing the Syrian population for five years now so it's an illegitimate government and as such, all its actions are illegitimate including inviting Iran or Russia and so on and so forth. So, that's not a very persuasive argument that some people on the Left and others tried to make.

Russia's interests in the region and especially in Syria are multiple. I think we have to look at the geopolitical, economic, and political levels. Geopolitically, Russia would like to have a presence in the region. It was already present before the Syrian uprising. It had a naval base in Tartus. It views Syria as a strategic region because it would give Russia access to the Mediterranean and that entire region.

Also, Russia uses Syria as a bargaining chip to solidify its position in other regions such as Ukraine and the Balkans, where it's been battling with the West and fears that some of the Balkan countries would join NATO. For them, Syria serves a similar purpose in other regions such as Yemen and Iran.

There is also the political level. Russian foreign policy, at least since Putin took power, has been motivated by anti-Atlanticism and has been opposing the US presence not only in the region but also beyond. Syria has become one of those hotspots where Russia feels that it needs to make a point against the West and doesn't want to lose that country to the West. It's also using Syria to oppose some jihadist groups because Russia believes that there is a conspiracy against the Russian state after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that there are different jihadist groups or regions that could potentially split because of the continuation of the Arab revolts.

Very early on, Russia has opposed the Arab revolution and felt that this was a Western conspiracy against Russia and that it was a continuation of the Velvet Revolutions and so on and so forth. So it's been opposing the Syrian revolt for that second reason. Finally, there are also economic reasons. They're not as substantial as the political and geopolitical but they're there. Russia used to have at least $20 billion of commercial exchange with Syria before the revolution in 2009 and would like to preserve that in the future and expand it. I think it's important to look at all these different dimensions.

On the other side, what role did the United States and the Gulf monarchies play in the arming and financing of certain groups and how did that affect the coherence of the revolutionary movement against the dictatorship?

The United States had a very ambivalent position on the Syrian revolt. The United States under Obama was reluctant to be too much involved in Syria because he didn't want to commit new troops or fund new wars in the region. He was more interested in a presence in East Asia and other regions. There was obviously a conflict or some kind of tension within his administration. For example, Ambassador Ford and Hillary Clinton had slightly different positions.

The United States was also interested in stopping the momentum of the Arab revolts and Syria was a

good place to do that by pushing for militarization and for a war of attrition, undermining the Arab uprising and sending a message to Arab populations that revolutions could end in a very bloody way sometimes. I think that was part of the message.

In addition to that, the United States was not necessarily opposed to incremental involvement by Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and as such weakening those two important powers in the region and helping Israel in that regard. The Gulf had similar reasons in undermining the Syrian revolt. Oftentimes the Gulf is presented as a supporter of the opposition and a supporter of the revolution but I think that's a very misguided understanding of the Syrian revolt.

The Gulf very early on was backing the Syrian regime and it kept backing the Syrian regime at least for six months until it felt that that was the lost cause. Then it shifted to backing the most reactionary and conservative groups in the opposition and wanted to play a role by funding those groups and undermining the more progressive and secular groups. Playing a geopolitical role for at least Saudi Arabia and Qatar was important and they were doing that in Syria.

There was also some kind of confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Qatar was supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and in Egypt and Tunisia, whereas Saudi Arabia was more interested in funding and supporting more Salafi and jihadist groups. Syria was also used by the Gulf countries to send a signal to their populations that revolution could end up in a civil war and can be very violent, and that was a threat to their populations that igniting or starting a revolt might end up into something similar to what's happening in Syria. I think it's the combination of these different dimensions that led the Gulf to an incremental and more important role in Syria.

Why hasn't the United States allowed the Syrian opposition forces to acquire the weapons they need to defend themselves from regime and Russian air strikes? What is the US policy towards Syria and does Washington actually want the collapse of the Syrian regime?

It's not clear if in the early period Washington really wanted the collapse of the Syrian regime or was just conducting a PR campaign. Obviously, the United States backed Mubarak early on and was opposed to the revolutionary grassroots movement in the entire region and so it wanted to run a PR campaign to improve its image in the region and send a signal that it supports those legitimate revolts and so on. That policy very quickly changed once some Islamist groups emerged and it felt that Iran and Hezbollah, as I mentioned before, would play a more important role, it discarded that policy and allowed for the war of attrition.

I think since the emergence of ISIS, the United States changed its policy and because of the spillover effect, the fear of ISIS conducting terrorist attacks in Europe and in the West in general, the United States felt that it had to be much more involved in northern Syria where ISIS is present, but has not pushed for an end to the Syrian regime since 2012. There are multiple examples that demonstrate that.

Turkey under Erdoğan has also been a significant player in Syria over the last five years. What are Turkey's interests and how have they influenced the situation in Syria? Are we seeing shifts in Turkish policy towards the Syrian revolution?

Like the Gulf countries, Erdoğan was supporting the Syrian regime early on and was fearing a form of contamination or ripple effect in Turkey and was opposed to the Syrian revolt for these reasons, but he's changed. Like the Gulf region or the Gulf countries, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, he changed his position once he felt that the Muslim Brotherhood could play a role and could possibly topple the Syrian regime. That has been the policy in Turkey since early on.

Also, very early on, Erdoğan was funding and equipping and pushing several opposition groups to fight the Kurdish regions and prevent any kind of role that those Kurdish regions would have played during that period. But once the Muslim Brotherhood was marginalized, it shifted its policy and now it's siding and trying to build an alliance with Russia because the Russians support Erdoğan's policy of limiting the influence of the Kurds in Syria, and Putin has allowed Erdoğan to send troops into Syria and fight the Kurds and prevent the emergence of that Kurdish entity.

That's basically the tacit agreement between Putin and Erdoğan. Erdoğan is mostly interested in building a buffer zone between Turkey and Syria and preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity rather than supporting any legitimate demands of the opposition or the success of the Syrian revolution.

I'd like to shift to the Left's response to these events. What positions do you think the antiwar movement in the West should have to the Russian bombing of Syria? Should a Western antiwar movement only have demands aimed at their government?

Obviously, the global left, the antiwar movement in the West and beyond, should oppose the Russian bombing of Syria. That's the most rational and commonsensical position to have and it's bewildering to see that some groups in the Left and some anti-imperialist parties or segments of the Left support the Russian war of aggression in Syria and they believe that this is a war against jihadists and against ISIS and in support of an anti-imperialist government in Syria. That can't be further from truth.

So the Left should build a front against not only the Western involvement in the region in Syria and the Arab world but also understand the new development in world politics and the incrementally aggressive and violent role that Russia is playing and build strategies and policies and tactics to oppose that incremental role. They could do that in different ways. Some of them have been very creative. Some grassroots movements in the West have been very creative in building some form of opposition to the role that their country is playing. In any case, they should oppose the Russian bombing of Syria.

Some on the Left also argue that anti-imperialists should take no position on Assad and that the American people have no right to determine who runs the government of Syria because that's really up to the Syrians themselves. What in your view should a genuine anti-imperialist position look like?

That kind of neutralist position is obviously very detrimental and is very costly and will only give more power to the Syrian regime and basically will allow the Syrian regime to perpetrate its violence against the population. Many anti-imperialist groups have been misunderstanding the situation in Syria and the nature of the Syrian regime and have been arguing that the Left should not be involved, but in reality, that position is a form of tacit support to the Syrian regime because it has invited a number of different state actors, Russia and Iran and others, Iraq, and in a way, Lebanon to play a major role.

They are basically allowing the Assad regime to use foreign forces and foreign intervention to crush the revolt. That's not a tenable or a defendable position, I think. The Left has been perceiving the Syrian revolt and the Arab Revolt more generally as Islamist, as basically led by jihadists, and that's due to the orientalist understanding of major segments of the Left who think that Arabs have no agency, that only Islamist groups or parties have momentum and are playing a role in Syria and the Arab region more generally, and they deny any agency on the part of the secular and the Left in Syria.

They also understand the situation in Syria simply through a geopolitical lens by arguing that it's a war against Syria, and since from their perspective Syria is an anti-imperialist force or state, that's a war against a progressive force or a progressive country. Again, I think that's misguided. Instead, we should understand the conflict in Syria from a grassroots lens, understand the power of the social movements in Syria and the entire Arab world, and understand also the importance of micro-politics which is taking place in every region in Syria.

People are struggling on an everyday basis and creating institutions and reimagining policy and ideology and culture and so on and so forth. From the perspective of that anti-imperialist left, that doesn't really exist. It's invisible. We don't see it because it doesn't function within the framework with which they're familiar, which is geopolitical, which uses the state as the only unit of analysis.

I think the Left in general would benefit from shifting its understanding of politics in the region and should avoid reducing all politics to a state-centric geopolitics and try to understand the significance of micro-processes and grassroots movements and their momentum and power. Those movements are operating on a horizontal level and oftentimes, they're difficult to perceive if you're not involved or not interested in the region except for making an "anti-imperialist stance."

Also, the Left should stop its Islamophobic, Arabophobic reading of the region and stop using Western politics as the sole entry point to understanding politics in the region because obviously, people are using different political and cultural tools to operate. They're not using the same kind of language. The nature of the Arab revolts and their newness are preventing a part of that Left from understanding what's happening.

As such, that so-called anti-imperialist left is reducing everything to conspiracy and to a jihadist war, to foreign, imperialist intervention. That's obviously very detrimental in the short run and the long-term. I think that the Arab revolution and Syrian revolt more specifically will not only topple the Syrian regime, but also that kind of archaic old-left ideology that's not able to acknowledge the struggle of the Syrians and understand their suffering and pain and their politics of dignity.

One topic that has been very controversial is the issue of a no-fly zone. How should the Left understand pleas for a no-fly zone over Syria? Are they simply calls for imperial intervention?

I think that the Left should oppose the no-fly zone. There is a long history of the implications of the no-fly zone and the destruction that they cause, the suffering, pain, and the killing of civilians and innocents. I don't think that there are any real successful examples of a no-fly zone. That should be the entry point to producing a position on the no-fly zone.

On the other hand, I understand that many Syrians who are receiving the bombs of Russia and the Syrian regime are calling for a no-fly zone. I think that it's important not to demonize those people, who are dying under those bombs, and understand their demands. For example, one of the things that the Left should do is put enough pressure on the United States and on the West more generally and I think that there is some tension on that issue.

The United States does not want the Syrian opposition to acquire anti-aircraft missiles or MANPADS whereas some Western countries and the Gulf would like to send those weapons. But the opposition is forming these demands for no-fly zones because of the US embargo preventing such weapons from entering Syria. If the opposition really had those type of weapons, the no-fly zone would not be necessary because people would be able to defend themselves and strike back if the Syrian jets or the Russian jets are bombing their cities and villages. That's my position and I think that should be the position of the Left.

Finally, what do you think people in the United States can do, people who want to stand in solidarity with Syrians?

I think that they should start by informing themselves and understanding the complexity of the Syrian revolution, recognizing the legitimate demands of the Syrian people, understanding the long history of dictatorship in Syria, building alliances and networks with Syrians who are on the ground but also Syrians in the diaspora.

I think that Syrian migrants and the Syrian refugees in general should play a major role in building those movements in the United States and Europe and other places. So building a grassroots global coalition to put pressure on the Syrian regime and Russia and other players to put an end to the war in Syria and remove the Syrian dictator from power.

That has to be done in many different forms. I think that grassroots movements in the past have been very creative and powerful, and there are numerous examples; the Vietnam antiwar movement, the movement against South African apartheid, the more recent Palestinian struggle and global boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) campaign, that we should learn from.

I think the starting point is to have an open and sincere conversation with Syrian activists who, because of the war and because of the revolution, have been exiled and are present in almost every society on earth. Many of them were involved to different degrees with the grassroots movements in Syria. The European and US left could benefit and learn from those Syrians, while strategizing to build a coalition that unites the antiwar movement in the United States with Black Lives Matter, women and LGBT movements, and the BDS movement.

I think we need to think about Syria and the Arab world in the long term. It’s going to be a long struggle unfortunately. The counterrevolution is currently winning and the revolution is in many ways besieged, like many cities and villages in Syria. So the question is how do we break that siege and how do we make the voices of the Syrians on the ground heard? How do we translate the struggles of the Syrians to Western audiences that don’t necessarily speak the language? I don’t mean by that speaking Arabic but rather the political and cultural language and the way that people are struggling and fighting back and resisting.

Oftentimes they’re not necessarily familiar with those strategies, and because of the newness of the Arab revolt and the specificity of Arab dictatorship and Syrian dictatorship, people in Syria have come up with new strategies and new tactics that are not necessarily known in the West. That’s making the formation of solidarity between the grassroots Western movement and the Syrian people more difficult. I think that should be the entry point, trying to build a public sphere where Syrians can have their voice heard to explain the conflict and the revolution to Western audiences.

The Western grassroots movement should be more humble in understanding and supporting the Syrian people. It’s not going to be easy, we should think about the long term. We should understand the nature of the counterrevolutionary movements and avoid easy explanations through conspiracy theories or “anti-imperialism,” whose analytic tools don’t function the same way anymore.

The entry point to building a coalition is not asking a set of demands from the Syrian opposition and the people who are struggling in the region, but rather understanding the difficulty of operating in Syria and the Arab region more generally. Not denigrating Syrians because they are too Islamist or too religious or not secular enough or not feminist enough and so on and so forth, but rather understanding how feminism in that region functions, without bringing the orientalist clichés. Understanding that Islam can be also emancipatory and that pious people have also rights to a politics of dignity.

That’s a big agenda and a difficult movement to build but I think we can see some of that emerging in the West and in the United States. For example, there is more and more fragmentation in the antiwar movement. Part of the antiwar movement is opposed to foreign intervention while ignoring completely the violence of the Russian intervention in Syria or the violence of the Syrian regime. That kind of obsolete politics should be opposed and this is why I think that a new antiwar movement should emerge.

Likewise, Syrians who are in the diaspora should also understand the struggle of Black Lives Matter for example and support that, understand that the struggle against the police state in the United States is a continuation of their struggle, and the migrant struggle in France against xenophobic parties is also a continuation of their struggle in France and Britain and Germany and so on and so forth. Basically, the question is how do we make that kind of global movement, how do we make those connections and translate each other, and understand the priorities of the different struggles, to build a multi-layered horizontal movement that addresses all these different questions.

I think that’s necessary in the context of the economic crisis; of the xenophobic parties emerging in the West; also of the jihadist groups that have gained momentum not only in Syria but the entire region. The momentum of some of the old discourses such as clashes of civilization and a Western war against Islamic fundamentalists and so on should be opposed. Instead we should find the commonalities between the West, Syria, and the Arab world; and make connections between the labor movement and the antiwar movement and the antiracist movement and so on and so forth.

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