Understanding the Rebellion in Syria

written by Joseph Daher | December 9, 2024

The rebellion in Syria has taken the world by surprise and led to the fall of the Assad family dictatorship, which has ruled Syria since Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, took power in a coup d'état 54 years ago. Neither the regime's military forces nor its imperial sponsor, Russia, and its regional backer, Iran, were able to defend it. Cities under the regime's control have been freed, thousands of political prisoners liberated from its notorious dungeons, and space opened for a new fight for a free, inclusive, and democratic Syria for the first time in decades.

At the same time, most Syrians know that such a struggle faces enormous challenges, beginning with the two key rebel forces, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). While they spearheaded the military victory, they are authoritarian and have a history of religious and ethnic sectarianism. Some on the Left have claimed without foundation that their rebellion was orchestrated by the U.S. and Israel. Others have uncritically romanticized these rebel forces as rekindling the original popular revolution that nearly overthrew Assad's regime in 2011. Neither captures the complex dynamics unfolding in Syria today.

*In this interview, conducted amidst a rapidly changing situation in Syria, Tempest asks Swiss Syrian socialist **Joseph Daher** about the process that led to the fall of Assad's rule, the prospects for progressive forces, and the challenges they face in fighting for a truly liberated country that serves the interests of all its peoples and popular classes.*

T**empest:** *How are Syrians feeling after the fall of the regime?*

Joseph Daher: The happiness is unbelievable. It is a historic day. 54 years of tyranny of Assad's family is gone. We saw videos of popular demonstrations throughout the country, from Damascus, Tartous, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Qamichli, Suwaida, etc. of all religious sects and ethnicities, destroying statues and symbols of the Assad's family.

And of course, there is great happiness for the liberation of political prisoners from the regime's prisons, particularly Sednaya prison, known as the "human slaughterhouse" which could contain 10,000-20,000 prisoners. Some of them had been detained since the 1980s. Similarly, people, who had been displaced in 2016 or earlier, from Aleppo and other cities, have been able to return to their homes and neighborhoods, seeing their families for the first time in years.

At the same time, in the first days following the military offensive, popular reactions were initially mixed and confused, reflecting the diversity of political opinion in Syrian society, both within and outside the country. Some sections were very happy with the conquest of these territories and the weakening of the regime, and now its potential fall.

But, some sectors of the population were, and are still, also fearful of HTS and SNA. They are worried about the authoritarian and reactionary nature of these forces and their political project.

And some are worried about what will happen in the new situation. In particular, wide sections of Kurds as well as others, while happy for the fall of the dictatorship of Assad, have issued condemnations of the SNA's forced displacement and assassinations of people.

Tempest: *Can you recount the sequence of events, especially the rebel advance, that defeated Assad's military forces and led to his downfall? What has happened?*

JD: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) launched a military campaign on November 27, 2024 against the Syrian regime's forces, scoring stunning victories. In less than a week, HTS and SNA took control of most of Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Then, the city Hama, located 210 kilometers north of Damascus, fell into the hands of HTS and SNA following intense military confrontations between them and regime forces supported by the Russian air force. Following Hama, HTS took control of Homs.

Initially, the Syrian regime sent reinforcements to Hama and Homs, and then, with the support of the Russian air force, bombed the cities of Idlib and Aleppo and its surroundings. On December 1 and 2, more than 50 airstrikes hit Idlib, at least four health facilities, four school facilities, two displacement camps, and a water station were impacted. The airstrikes have displaced over 48,000 people and severely disrupted services and aid delivery. The dictator Bashar al-Assad had promised defeat to his enemies and stated that "terrorism only understands the discourse of force." But his regime was already crumbling from everywhere.

While the regime was losing town after town, the southern governorates of Suweida and Daraa liberated themselves; their popular and local armed opposition forces, separate and distinct from HTS and SNA, seized control. Regime forces then withdrew from localities about ten kilometers from Damascus, and abandoned their positions in the province of Quneitra, which borders the Golan Heights, which is occupied by Israel.

As different opposition armed forces, again not HTS nor SNA, approached the capital Damascus, regime's forces just crumbled and withdrew, while demonstrations and the burning of all symbols of Bashar al-Assad multiplied in the various suburbs of Damascus. On the night of December 7 and 8, it was announced that Damascus was liberated. The exact fate and location of Bashar al-Assad was initially unknown, but some information indicated that he was in Russia under the protection of Moscow.

The fall of the regime proved its structural weakness, militarily, economically, and politically. It collapsed like a house of cards. This is hardly surprising because it seemed clear that the soldiers were not going to fight for the Assad regime, given their poor wages and conditions. They preferred to flee or just not fight rather than defend a regime for which they have very little sympathy, especially because a lot of them had been forcefully conscripted.

Alongside these dynamics in the south, others have occurred in different parts of the country since the start of the rebels' offensive. First, the SNA led attacks on territories controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Aleppo, and then announced the beginning of a new offensive against the northern city of Manbij, which is under the domination of the SDF. On Sunday December 8, with the support of the Turkish army, airforce, and artillery, the SNA entered the city.

Second, the SDF has captured most of Deir-ez-Zor governorate formerly controlled by Syrian regime forces and pro-Iran militias, after they had withdrawn to redeploy in other areas to fight against HTS

and SNA. SDF then extended their control over vast swaths of the northeast previously under the regime's domination.

Tempest: *Who are the rebel forces and in particular the main rebel formation HTS and SNA? What are their politics, program, and project? What do the popular classes think of them?*

JD: The successful seizure of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and of other territories in a military campaign led by HTS reflects in many ways the evolution of this movement over several years into a more disciplined and more structured organization, both politically and militarily. It now can produce drones and runs a military academy. HTS has been able to impose its hegemony on a certain number of military groups, through both repression and inclusion in the past few years. Based on these developments, it positioned itself to launch this attack.

It has become a quasi-state actor in the areas it controls. It has established a government, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which acts as HTS' civil administration and provides services. There has been a clear willingness by HTS and SSG in the past few years to present themselves as a rational force to regional and international powers in order to normalize its rule. This has notably resulted in more and more space for some NGOs to operate in key sectors such as education and healthcare, in which SSG lacks financial resources and expertise.

This does not mean that no corruption exists in areas under its rule. It has enforced its rule through authoritarian measures and policing. HTS has notably repressed or limited activities it considers as contrary to its ideology. For instance, HTS stopped several projects supporting women, particularly camp residents, under the pretext that these cultivated ideas of gender equality that were hostile to its rule. HTS has also targeted and detained political opponents, journalists, activists, and people it viewed as critics or opponents.

HTS—which is still categorized as a terrorist organization by many powers including the U.S.—has also been trying to project a more moderate image of itself, trying to win recognition that it is now a rational and responsible actor. This evolution dates back to the rupture of its ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and its reframing of its political objectives in the Syrian national framework. It has also repressed individuals and groups connected to Al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State.

In February 2021, for his first interview with an U.S.journalist, its leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, or Ahmed al-Sharaa (his real name), declared that the region he controlled "does not represent a threat to the security of Europe and America," asserting that areas under its rule would not become a base for operations abroad.

In this attempt to define himself as a legitimate interlocutor on the international scene, he emphasized the group's role in fighting against terrorism. As part of this makeover, it has allowed the return of Christians and Druze in some areas and established contacts with some leaders from these communities.

Following the capture of Aleppo, HTS continued to present itself as a responsible actor. HTS fighters for instance immediately posted videos in front of banks, offering assurances that they wanted to protect private property and assets. They also promised to protect civilians and minority religious communities, particularly Christians, because they know that the fate of this community is closely scrutinized abroad.

Similarly, HTS has made numerous statements promising similar protection of Kurds and Islamic minorities such as Ismaelis and Druzes. It also issued a statement regarding Alawites that called on them to break with the regime, without however suggesting that HTS would protect them or saying

anything clear about their future. In this statement, HTS describes the Alawite community as an instrument of the regime against the Syrian people.

Finally, the leader of HTS, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, has stated that the city of Aleppo will be managed by a local authority, and all military forces, including those of HTS, will fully withdraw from the city in the coming weeks. It is clear that al-Jolani wants to actively engage with local, regional, and international powers.

However, it is still an open question as to whether HTS will follow through on these statements. The organization has been an authoritarian and reactionary organization with an Islamic fundamentalist ideology, and still has foreign fighters within its ranks. Many popular demonstrations in the past few years have occurred in Idlib against its rule and violations of political freedoms and human rights, including assassinations and torture of opponents.

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It is not enough to tolerate religious or ethnic minorities or allow them to pray. The key issue is recognizing their rights as equal citizens participating in deciding the future of the country. More generally, statements by the head of HTS, al-Jolani, such as “people who fear Islamic governance either have seen incorrect implementations of it or do not understand it properly,” are definitely not reassuring, but quite the opposite.

Regarding the Turkish-backed SNA, it is a coalition of armed groups mostly with Islamic conservative politics. It has a very bad reputation and is guilty of numerous human rights violations especially against Kurdish populations in areas under their control. They have notably participated in the Turkish-led military campaign to occupy Afrin in 2018, leading to the forced displacement of around 150,000 civilians, the vast majority of them Kurds.

In the current military campaign, once again SNA serves mainly Turkish objectives in targeting areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and with large Kurdish populations. The SNA has, for instance, captured the city of Tal Rifaat and Shahba area in northern Aleppo, previously under the governance of the SDF, leading to the forced displacement of more than 150,000 civilians and many violations of human rights against Kurdish individuals, including assassinations and kidnappings. The SNA then announced a military offensive, supported by the Turkish army on the city of Manbij, home to 100,000 civilians, and controlled by the SDF.

There are, therefore, differences between HTS and SNA. The HTS has a relative autonomy from Turkey in contrast to the SNA, which is controlled by Turkey and serves its interests. The two forces are different, pursue distinct goals, and have conflicts between them, although for the moment these have been kept under wraps. For instance, HTS is currently not seeking to confront the SDF. In addition to this, the SNA published a critical statement against HTS for their “aggressive behavior” against SNA members, while HTS reportedly blamed SNA fighters for looting.

Tempest: *For many who have not been paying attention to Syria, this came out of the blue. What are the roots of this situation in Syria’s revolution, counter-revolution, and civil war? What has happened inside the country over the recent period that triggered the military offensive? What are the regional and international dynamics that opened space for the rebel advances?*

JD: Initially, HTS launched the military campaign as a reaction to the escalation of attacks and bombing of its northwestern territory by Assad’s regime and Russia. It also aimed to recapture areas that the regime had conquered, violating the de-escalation zones agreed upon in a March 2020 deal,

negotiated by Moscow and Tehran. With their surprising success, however, they expanded their ambitions and openly called for the overthrow of the regime, which they and others have now accomplished.

The HTS and SNA have been so successful because of the weakening of the regime's main allies. Russia, Assad's key international sponsor, has diverted its forces and resources to its imperialist war against Ukraine. As a result, its involvement in Syria has been significantly more limited than in similar military operations in previous years.

Because of all its structural weaknesses, lack of support from the population it rules, unreliability of its own troops, and without international and regional support, [the Assad regime] proved unable to withstand the rebel forces advances and in city after city and its rule over them has collapsed like a house of cards.

Its other two key allies, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran, have been dramatically weakened by Israel since October 7, 2023. Tel Aviv has carried out assassinations of Hezbollah's leadership, including Hassan Nasrallah, decimated its cadre with the pager attacks, and bombed its forces in Lebanon. Hezbollah is definitely facing its greatest challenge since its foundation. Israel has also launched waves of strikes against Iran, exposing its vulnerabilities. It has also increased bombing of Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria in the past few months.

With its main backers preoccupied and weakened, Assad's dictatorship was in a vulnerable position. Because of all its structural weaknesses, lack of support from the population it rules, unreliability of its own troops, and without international and regional support, it proved unable to withstand the rebel forces advances and in city after city and its rule over them has collapsed like a house of cards.

Tempest: *How had the regime's allies initially responded? What are their interests in Syria?*

JD: Both Russia and Iran initially pledged to support the regime and also pressured it to fight the HTS and SNA. In the first days of the offensive, Russia called on the Syrian regime to pull itself together and "put order in Aleppo," which seems to indicate that it was hoping for Damascus to counter-attack.

Iran called for "coordination" with Moscow in the face of this offensive. It has claimed that the U.S. and Israel are behind the rebel's offensive against the Syrian regime's attempt to destabilize it and divert attention from Israel's war in Palestine and Lebanon. Iranian officials declared their full support for the Syrian regime and confirmed their intentions to maintain and even increase the presence of their "military advisers" in Syria to support its army. Teheran also promised to provide missiles and drones to the Syrian regime and even deploy its own troops.

But this clearly did not work. Despite Russian bombing of areas outside of the control of the regime, the rebels' advance was undeterred.

Both powers have a lot to lose in Syria. For Iran, Syria is crucial for the transfer of weapons to, and logistic coordination with, Hezbollah. It was actually rumoured before the fall of the regime that the Lebanese party has sent a small number of "supervisory forces" to Homs in order to assist regime's military forces and 2000 soldiers in the city of Qusayr, one of its strongholds in Syria near the border with Lebanon, to defend it in the event of an attack by the rebels. As the regime was falling, it withdrew its forces.

On its side, Russia's Hmeimim airbase in Syria's Latakia province, and its naval facility at Tartous on the coast, have been important sites for Russia to assert its geopolitical clout in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa. Loss of these bases would undermine Russia's status as its intervention

in Syria has been used as an example of how it can use military force to shape events outside of its borders and compete with western states.

Tempest: *What role have other regional and imperial powers, particularly Turkey, Israel, and the U.S. played in this scenario? What are their ambitions in the situation?*

JD: Despite Turkey's normalization with Syria, Ankara has grown frustrated with Damascus. So, it encouraged, or at least gave the green light to, the military offensive and assisted it one way or another. Ankara's objective was initially to improve its position in future negotiations with the Syrian regime, but also with Iran and Russia.

Now with the fall of the regime, Turkey's influence is even more important in Syria and probably makes it the key regional actor in the country. Ankara is also seeking to use the SNA to weaken the SDF, which is dominated by the armed wing of the Kurdish party PYD, a sister organization of Turkey's Kurdish party PKK, which is designated as terrorist by Ankara, the U.S., and the E.U..

Turkey has two other main objectives. First, they aim to carry out the forced return of Syrian refugees in Turkey back to Syria. Second, they want to deny Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and more specifically undermine the Kurdish-led administration in northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, also called Rojava), which would set a precedent for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey, a threat to the regime as it is currently constituted.

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Neither the U.S.nor Israel had a hand in these events. In fact, the opposite is the case. The U.S. were worried that the overthrow of the regime could create more instability in the region. U.S. officials initially declared that the "Assad regime's ongoing refusal to engage in the political process outlined in UNSCR 2254, and its reliance on Russia and Iran, created the conditions now unfolding, including the collapse of Assad regime lines in northwest Syria."

It also declared that it had "nothing to do with this offensive, which is led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist organization." Following a visit to Turkey, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for de-escalation in Syria. After the fall of the regime, U.S. officials declared that they will maintain their presence in eastern Syria, around 900 soldiers, and will take measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State.

For their part, Israeli officials declared that the "collapse of the Assad regime would likely create chaos in which military threats against Israel would develop." Moreover, Israel has never really supported the overthrow of the Syrian regime all the way back to the attempted revolution in 2011. In July 2018 Netanyahu did not object to Assad taking back control of the country and stabilizing his power.

Netanyahu said Israel would only act against perceived threats, such as Iran and Hezbollah's forces and influence, explaining, "We haven't had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights." A few hours after the announcement of the fall of the regime, the Israeli occupation army took control of the Syrian side of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights in order to prevent rebels from taking it over the area on Sunday. Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had ordered the Israeli occupation army to "take control" of the Golan buffer zone and "adjacent strategic positions."

Tempest: *Many campists have come to the defense of Assad yet again, this time contending that a defeat for Assad would be a setback for the Palestinian liberation struggle. What do you make of that argument? What will it mean for Palestine?*

JD: Yes, campists have argued that this military offensive is led by "Al-Qaeda and other terrorists" and that it is a western-imperialist plot against the Syrian regime intended to weaken the so-called "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and Hezbollah. Since this Axis claims to be in support of the Palestinians, the campists claim that the fall of Assad weakens it and therefore undermines the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

Alongside ignoring any agency to local Syrian actors, the main problem with the argument promoted by the supporters of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" is their assumption that the liberation of Palestine will come from above, from these states or other forces, regardless of their reactionary and authoritarian nature, and their neoliberal economic policies. That strategy has failed in the past and will do so again today. In fact, rather than advancing the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, the Middle East's authoritarian and despotic states, whether aligned with the West or opposed to it, have repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians and even repressed them.

Moreover, the campists ignore the fact that Iran and Syria's main objectives are not the liberation of Palestine but preservation of their states and their economic and geopolitical interests. They will put those before Palestine every single time. Syria, in particular, as Netanyahu has made abundantly clear in the quote I just cited, has not lifted a finger against Israel for decades.

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For its part, Iran has rhetorically supported the Palestinian cause and funded Hamas. But since October 7, 2023, its main goal has been to improve its standing in the region so as to be in the best position for future political and economic negotiations with the U.S. Iran wishes to guarantee its political and security interests and therefore has been keen to avoid any direct war with Israel.

Its main geopolitical objective in relation to the Palestinians is not to liberate them, but to use them as leverage, particularly in its relations with the United States. Similarly, Iran's passive response to Israel's assassination of Nasrallah, decimation of Hezbollah's cadres, and its brutal war against Lebanon demonstrate that its first priority is protecting itself and its interests. It was not willing to sacrifice these and come to the defense of its key non-state ally.

Similarly, Iran has proved itself, as at best, a fickle ally of Hamas. It has reduced its funding for Hamas when their interests did not coincide. It cut its financial assistance to Hamas after the Syrian Revolution in 2011, when the Palestinian movement refused to support the Syrian regime's murderous repression of Syrian protesters.

In the case of the Syrian regime, the argument against their supposed support for Palestine is airtight. It has not come to the defense of Palestine over the last year of Israel's genocidal war. Despite Israel's bombardment of Syria, before and after October 7, the regime has not responded. This is in line with the regime's policy since 1974 of trying to avoid any significant and direct confrontation with Israel.

On top of that the regime has repeatedly repressed Palestinians in Syria, including the killing of several thousands of them since 2011, laying waste to the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus.

They have also attacked the Palestinian national movement itself. For example, in 1976 Hafez al-Assad, father of his heir and just-deposed dictator Bashar al-Assad, intervened in Lebanon and supported far-right Lebanese parties against left-wing Palestinian and Lebanese organizations.

It also carried out military operations against Palestinian camps in Beirut in 1985 and 1986. In 1990 approximately 2,500 Palestinian political prisoners were detained in Syrian prisons.

Given this history, it is a mistake for the Palestine solidarity movement to defend and align itself with imperialist or sub-imperialist states that put their interests before solidarity with Palestine, compete for geopolitical gain, and exploit their countries' workers and resources. Of course, U.S. imperialism remains the region's main enemy with its exceptional history of war, plunder, and political domination.

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But it makes no sense to look reactionary regional powers and other imperialist states like Russia or China as allies of Palestine or its solidarity movement. There is simply no evidence to substantiate that position. To choose one imperialism over another is to guarantee the stability of the capitalist system and the exploitation of popular classes. Similarly, to support authoritarian and despotic regimes in pursuit of the objective of liberating Palestine is not only morally wrong but also has proved itself a failed strategy.

Instead, the Palestinian solidarity movement must see the liberation of Palestine as bound up not with the region's states but with the liberation of its popular classes. These identify with Palestine and see their own battles for democracy and equality as intimately tied to the Palestinian's struggle for liberation. When Palestinians fight, it tends to trigger the regional movement for liberation, and the regional movement feeds back into the one in occupied Palestine.

These struggles are dialectically connected; they are mutual struggles for collective liberation. Far-right Israeli minister Avigdor Lieberman recognized the danger that regional popular uprisings posed to Israel in 2011 when he said that the Egyptian revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak and opened the door to a period of democratic opening in the country was a greater threat to Israel than Iran.

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This is not to deny the right of resistance of Palestinians and Lebanese to Israel's brutal wars, but to understand that the united revolt of Palestinian and regional's popular classes alone have the power to transform the entire Middle East and North Africa, toppling authoritarian regimes, expelling the U.S. and other imperialist powers. International anti-imperialist solidarity with Palestine and the region's popular classes is essential, because they face not just Israel and the MENA's reactionary regimes, but also their imperialist backers.

The main task of the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly in the West, is to denounce the complicit role of our ruling classes in supporting not only the racist settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel and its genocidal war against the Palestinians, but also Israel's attacks on other countries in the region such as Lebanon. The movement must pressure those ruling classes to break off any political, economic, and military relations with Tel Aviv.

In that way, the solidarity movement can challenge and weaken international and regional support for Israel, opening the space for Palestinians to free themselves along with the popular classes in the region.

Tempest: *Will the rebels advance in Syria open space for progressive forces to renew the revolutionary struggle and provide an alternative to both the regime and Islamic fundamentalism?*

JD: There are no obvious answers except more questions. Will struggle from below and self-organization be possible in the areas in which the regime has been expelled? Will civil society's organizations (not narrowly defined as NGOs but in a Gramscian sense of popular mass formations outside of the state) and alternative political structures with democratic and progressive politics be able to establish themselves, organize, and constitute a political and social alternative to HTS and SNA? Will the stretching of HTS and SNA forces allow space to organize locally?

These are the key questions, in my opinion, without clear answers. Looking at HTS and SNA's policies in the past, they have not encouraged a democratic space to develop, but quite the opposite. They have been authoritarian. No trust should be accorded to such forces. Only the self-organization of popular classes fighting for democratic and progressive demands will create that space and open a path toward actual liberation. TThis will depend on overcoming many obstacles from war fatigue to repression, poverty, and social dislocation.

No trust should be accorded to [HTS and SNA]. Only the self-organization of popular classes fighting for democratic and progressive demands will create that space and open a path toward actual liberation. This will depend on overcoming many obstacles from war fatigue to repression, poverty, and social dislocation.

The main obstacle has been, is, and will be the authoritarian actors, previously the regime, but now many of the opposition forces, especially the HTS and SNA; their rule and the military clashes between them have suffocated the space for democratic and progressive forces to democratically determine their future. Even in the spaces freed from regime control we have yet to see popular campaigns of democratic and progressive resistance. And, where the SNA has conquered Kurdish areas, it violated Kurd's rights, repressed them with violence, and forcefully displaced large numbers of them.

We have to face the hard fact that there is a glaring absence of an independent democratic and progressive bloc that is able to organize and clearly oppose the Syrian regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces. Building this bloc will take time. It will have to combine struggles against autocracy, exploitation, and all forms of oppression. It will need to raise demands for democracy, equality, Kurdish self-determination, and women's liberation in order to build solidarity among the country's exploited and oppressed.

To advance such demands, that progressive bloc will have to build and rebuild popular organizations from unions to feminist organizations, community organizations, and national structures to bring them together. That will require collaboration between democratic and progressive actors throughout society.

This said, there is hope, while the key dynamics was initially military and led by HTS and SNA, in the past few days, we saw growing popular demonstrations and people coming out in the streets throughout the country. They are not following any orders of HTS, SNA or any other armed opposition groups. There is a space now, with its contradictions and challenges as mentioned above, for Syrians to try to rebuild civilian popular resistance from below and alternative structures of power.

In addition to this, one of the key tasks will be to tackle the country's central ethnic division, the one between Arab and Kurds. Progressive forces must wage a clear struggle against Arab chauvinism to overcome this division and forge solidarity between these populations. This has been a challenge from the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and will have to be confronted and resolved in a progressive manner in order for the country's people to be truly liberated.

There is a desperate need to return to the original aspirations of the Syrian Revolution for democracy, social justice and equality—and in a fashion that upholds Kurdish self-determination. While the Kurdish PYD can be criticized for its mistakes and form of rule, it is not the main obstacle to such solidarity between Kurds and Arabs. That has been the belligerent and chauvinist positions and policies of Arab opposition forces in Syria—beginning with the Arab-dominated Syrian National Coalition followed by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the main opposition bodies in exile supported by the West and regional countries, that tried to lead the Syrian Revolution in its early years—and today those of the two key military forces, the HTS and SNA.

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In this context, progressive forces must pursue collaboration between Syrian Arabs and Kurds, including the AANES. The AANES project and its political institutions represent large sections of the Kurdish population and have protected it against various local and external threats.

That said, it too has faults and must not be supported uncritically. The PYD and AANES have used force and repression against political activists and groups challenging its power. And it has also violated the human rights of civilians. Nonetheless, it has scored some important achievements, in particular its increase of women's participation in all levels in society, as well as the codification of secular laws and a greater inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities. However, on socio-economic issues, it has not broken with capitalism and has not adequately addressed the grievances of the popular classes.

Whatever criticisms progressives may have of the PYD and the AANES, we must reject and oppose Arab chauvinist descriptions of it as "the devil" and a "separatist" ethno-nationalist project. But in rejecting such bigotry, we must not uncritically romanticize the AANES, as some western anarchists and leftists have done, misrepresenting it as a new form of democratic power from below.

There has already been some collaboration between Syrian Arab democrats and progressives and AANES and institutions connected to it, and that must be built on and expanded. But, as in any kind of collaboration, this should not be done uncritically.

While it is important to remind everyone that Bashar al-Assad's regime and its allies are the first responsible for the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians, mass destructions, deepening impoverishment and the current situation in Syria, the objective of the Syrian revolution goes beyond what HTS leader, al-Jolani, said in his interview with CNN. It is not only to overthrow this regime, but to build a society characterized by democracy, equality, and full rights for oppressed groups. Otherwise, we are only replacing one evil with another.

Tempest: *What impact will the fall of the regime have on the region and the imperial powers? What position should the international Left take in this situation?*

JD: Following the fall of the regime, HTS leader al-Jolani, stated that Syrian state institutions will be supervised by former regime's Prime Minister Mohammed Jalali until they are handed over to a new government with full executive powers, following elections, signalling efforts to secure an orderly

transition. Syrian telecommunications minister Eyad al-Khatib agreed to collaborate with HTS's representatives to ensure that telecoms and the internet would continue to function.

These are clear indications that HTS wants to carry out a controlled transition of power in order to appease foreign fears, establish contacts with regional and international powers, and win recognition as a legitimate force that can be negotiated with. An obstacle to such normalization is the fact that HTS is still considered as a terrorist organisation, while Syria is under sanctions.

A period of instability is nevertheless to be expected in the country. In Damascus, on the day after the fall of the regime, some chaos in the streets could be seen, the central bank was for example looted.

It is still hard to tell what impact the regime's fall will have on the regional and imperial powers. For the U.S. and western states, the main objective is now damage control to prevent chaos extending into the region. Regional states are clearly not satisfied with the current situation, as they had entered a normalization process with the regime in the past few years. Regarding Turkey, its main objective will be to consolidate its power and influence in Syria and get rid of the Kurdish-led AANES in the northeast. Turkey's top diplomat actually said on Sunday that the Turkish state was in contact with rebels in Syria to ensure that the Islamic State and specifically the "PKK" do not take advantage of the fall of the Damascus regime to extend their influence.

[The Left] must avoid the twin traps of romanticization and defeatism. Instead, we must pursue a strategy of critical, progressive, international solidarity among popular forces in the region and throughout the world.

The different powers have, however, a common objective: to impose a form of authoritarian stability in Syria and the region. That, of course, does not mean unity between the regional and imperial powers. They each have their own, and often antagonistic, interests, but they do not want the destabilization of the Middle East and North Africa, especially any kind of instability that would disrupt the flow of oil to global capitalism.

The international Left must not side with the remnants of the regime or the local, regional and international forces of counter-revolution. Instead, the political compass of revolutionaries should be the principle of solidarity with popular and progressive struggles from below. This means supporting groups and individuals organizing and fighting for a progressive and inclusive Syria and building solidarity between them and the region's popular classes.

Amidst a volatile moment in Syria, the Middle East, and North Africa we must avoid the twin traps of romanticization and defeatism. Instead, we must pursue a strategy of critical, progressive, international solidarity among popular forces in the region and throughout the world. This is the Left's crucial task and responsibility, especially in these very complex times.

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