“The war in Syria only benefits the counter-revolutionary forces” | Interview with Joseph Daher

Η συνέντευξη στα ελληνικά **εδώ**.

Interview-introduction: Lina Theodorou, Antonis Faras

The Syrian Civil War continues for 7th year, but it is still not clear when it will end. During the war, over half a million people died and about 10 million people, about half of the Syrian population, was displaced. On the occasion of the bombing of Syria, targeting the military bases of the Damascus regime, by US forces, the UK and France, the debate was renewed; anti-war strikes were organized and demonstrators even attempted to throw the statue of Harry S. Truman in Athens, Greece.

However, in the anti-war movement against the Syrian war, the hegemonic narrative within the Left has an approach to anti-imperialism, which, more or less, limits the position of imperialist exclusively to the United States. This view, which is an important analytical tool for interpreting the world outside of the West, takes one geopolitical character that neglects the social element as a factor of change, and on the other hand it implies a structural orientation in the way the Left treats politics, when talking about “others”.

Trying to shed more light on the debate, which is obscured rather than clarified by *ad hoc* confrontations, we asked Joseph Daher to answer a series of more comprehensive questions about the Syrian civil war. Daher is a Swiss-Syrian Marxist and scholar, whose books have been published in

English, such as "*Hezbollah: Political Economy of the Party of God*" (2016, Pluto Press).

We want to take a closer look at what have happened these seven years. Briefly: What led to the uprising specifically in Syria? What were Assad's relations with the Syrian left and anarchist space before the uprising? What was his relationship with sectarian extremism? Can you describe how the rebels organized during the first years of the uprising and what went wrong? How islamists prevailed, If they have, in the rebel's groups?

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

The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of important sections of Syrian society, in a climate of corruption and growing social inequalities, have paved the way for the popular uprising, which has been waiting for nothing more than a spark. Which was initially external with the fall of the dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and then internal with the torture of the children of Dar'a. These elements will trigger the process.

At first, the Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad

regime. They sustained the popular uprising for numerous years by organizing and documenting protests and acts of civil disobedience, and by motivating people to join protests. The earliest manifestations of the “coordinating committees” (or tansiqiyyat) were neighborhood gatherings throughout Syria. A number of youth progressive and democratic networks and groups emerged throughout the country. The regime specifically targeted these networks of activists, who had initiated demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and campaigns in favor of countrywide strikes.

> *The regime killed, imprisoned, kidnapped and pushed to exile these activists.*

From the first days of the revolutionary process, the regime dealt with the demonstrations with great violence and this increased with the massive interventions of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. This situation led to a rising number of defections among conscript soldiers and officers refusing to shoot on peaceful protesters, while at the same time initial unorganized and punctual armed resistance was starting to emerge towards the end of May and beginning of June 2011 in some localities against the security services. In the following months, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established, as well as a myriad of other brigades. Armed resistance against the regime was nearly generalized at the end of 2011, creating new dynamics in the uprising. The militarization was mainly the result of the violent repression on the local Syrian population opposing the regime; sections of it resorted to weapons to defend themselves. The first constituted armed opposition groups often had a purely local dynamic and served to defend their hometowns and areas from aggressions by the armed security services. The FSA was never a single and united institution, but rather a network of independent military groups fighting under its umbrella. The various forces of the Free Syrian Army have been increasingly and considerably weakened throughout the years.

The members of FSA units generally originated from the majority component of the uprising: marginalized (informal and formal) workers of the cities and countryside members of the popular classes who had suffered from the acceleration of neo-liberal economic policies since the arrival in power of Bashar al-Assad and of the repression of the regime security forces. The armed opposition was made up of defected soldiers from the Syrian army, but the vast majority were civilians who had decided to take up arms. Some brigades were loosely gathered under some common umbrella, such as the FSA, but most were locally organized and only active in their hometowns. Lacking unity and centralization, they coordinated on specific battlefields, but rarely on political and strategic decisions. They were generally gathered along village or extended family lines, with little ideological cohesion.

Tragically throughout the year, each defeat of the democratic resistance strengthened and benefited the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces on the ground. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements and their dominations on the military scene in some regions has been negative for the revolution, as they opposed its objectives (democracy, social justice and equality). With their sectarian and reactionary discourses and behaviors, these movements not only acted as a repellent for the vast majority of religious and ethnic minorities, and women, but also to sections of Arab Sunni populations in some liberated areas where we have seen demonstrations against them, especially among large sections of the middle class in Damascus and Aleppo. They attacked and continue to attack the democratic activists, while they often tried to impose their authority on the institutions developed by locals, often bringing resistance from local populations against their authoritarian behaviors.

Why we should continue talking about revolution in Syria – Isn’t it an old flame that went out? Which forms of struggle and organization evidence the continuity of revolutionary

subjects? Could you elaborate on the self-governing local councils across Syria?

Nobody denies that we are no longer in March 2011 and that the situation of democratic and progressive forces is very weak today in Syria. Revolutionary processes are long-term events, characterized by higher and lower level mobilizations according to the context. They are even characterized by some periods of defeat, but it's hard to say when they end. This is especially the case in Syria, when the conditions that allowed for the beginning of these uprisings are still present, while the regime is very far from finding ways to solve them.

However, these conditions are not enough to transform them into political opportunities, particularly after more than seven years of a destructive and murderous war accompanied by **a general and important fatigue in the Syrian population, just seeking for its great majority to return the stability in the country.** The effects of the war and its destructions will most probably weigh for years. Alongside this situation, no structured opposition body with a significant size and following offered an inclusive and democratic project that could appeal to large sectors of society was present, while the failures of the opposition bodies in exile and armed opposition groups left important frustrations and bitterness in people who participated and/or sympathized with the uprising.

The other element that could also play a role in shaping future events is the large documentation of the uprising that has never been seen before in history. There has been significant recording, testimonies and documentation of the protest movement, the actors involved and the modes of actions. In the seventies, Syria witnessed strong popular and democratic resistance with significant strikes and demonstrations throughout the country with mass followings. Unfortunately, this memory was not kept and was not well-known by the new generation of protesters in the country in 2011.

> *The Syrian revolutionary process that started in 2011 is one of the most documented. This memory will remain and could inspire and inform future resistance. The political experiences that have been accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not disappear.*

They are however still some pockets of isolated resistance in some areas, but they are very much weakened, in addition some attempts in exile are being worked to build democratic and progressive networks.

Regarding the number of local councils, they have diminished considerably after the fall of Eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and of Eastern Ghouta in March/April of this years because of the military advances of pro-regime forces capturing opposition held territories, and also as a result of the attacks of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist armed groups that replaced civilians councils with their own.

Regarding local councils that played an important role in the opposition held areas, we must be clear that their very important experiences did not mean that there were no shortcomings, such as the lack of representation of women, or of religious minorities in general. Other problems existed as well such as some forms of disorganization, undemocratic practices, over-representation of some influential families in some areas, etc. Civil councils were also not always completely autonomous from military groups, relying often on military groups for resources. While numerous council members were generally elected, nearly half of them, there were also a number of councils undemocratically appointed rather than elected, based on the influence of local military leaders, clan and family structures, and elders. Another problem that was encountered in the selection of the council's representatives was the need for particular professional and technical skills.

Despite these limitations, local councils were able to restore a minimum level of social services in their regions and enjoyed some level of legitimacy.

Is the rise of ISIS a fundamental element of the counter-revolution in the Middle East? If so, which are the other political and economic factors enabling the growth of fascist and fundamentalist forces. What role does religion play in Syria?

Explanations that want to find in the Quran and in Islam the reasons for the phenomena of ISIS are wrong, but above all reinforce racist and Islamophobic amalgams while wanting to characterize an intrinsic violent nature to Islam and Muslims more generally. Although ISIS claims to act in the name of Islam, the religion does not explain their behavior and actions. These groups and individuals take their source in the present time and not 1400 years ago, just as their actions.

Do we analyze the US invasion of Iraq by the religious beliefs of Bush (who had reported hearing God in a dream telling him that he had a mission and had to invade Iraq) or according to imperialist motives (political and economic reasons)? Will we find the reasons for the US invasion in the Bible? Will we analyze the US invasion based on the behavior of Christian 2000 years ago? Similarly, during the massacre perpetrated in Norway on July 22, 2011 by Anders Breivik, who claimed to act to preserve Christianity against multiculturalism, have we sought the reasons for his act in Christianity or the Bible?

The Arab writer Aziz Al-Azmeh, stated that “the understanding of Islamic political phenomena requires the normal equipment of the social and human sciences, not their denial” Not acting in this ways, will lead us to an essentialisation of “the Other”, in much of the current cases today of the “Muslim”.

> *Each religion does not exist indeed autonomously of people, in the same way that God does not exist outside of the field*

of intellectual action of man.

On the contrary religion, as the supernatural power of God, is a mystic popular expression of the contradictions and material realities in which people live.

We have to understand that ISIS's expansion is a fundamental element of the counter-revolution in the Middle East that emerged as the result of authoritarian regimes crushing popular movements linked to the 2011 Arab Spring. The interventions of regional and international states have contributed to ISIS's development as well. Finally, neo-liberal policies that have impoverished the popular class, together with the repression of democratic and trade union forces, have been key in helping ISIS and Islamic fundamentalist forces grow.

In this perspective, brute military force alone only ensures that other militant groups will take its place, as al-Qaida in Iraq demonstrates. Real solutions to the crisis in Syria and elsewhere in the region must address the socio-economic and political conditions that have enabled the growth of ISIS and other extremist organizations.

The Left must understand that only by ridding the region of the conditions that allowed ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups to develop can we resolve the crisis. At the same time, empowering those progressive and democratic forces on the ground who are fighting to overthrow despotic regimes and face reactionary groups is part and parcel of this approach. Clearly, no peaceful and just solution in Syria can be reached with Bashar al-Assad and his clique in power. He is the biggest criminal in Syria and must be prosecuted for his crimes instead of being legitimized by international and regional powers.

There's a leading leftist narrative regarding the war in Syria suggesting that given the recent developments, the bombing of

military bases in Damascus, the cause of anti-imperialism call us to support Syria people, and consequently Bassar al Assad's regime. What do you think about that?

It is important to remember that, even though conflicting interests exist between international and regional powers that are intervening in Syria, none of these actors care about the uprising or the revolutionaries. Instead, they have attempted to undermine the popular movement against Assad and successfully worked to strengthen sectarian and ethnic tensions in the country. These intervening forces have, for example, helped stabilize the Assad regime in order to oppose Kurdish autonomy (in Turkey's case) and to defeat extremist groups such as ISIS (in the case of the United States).

The intervening powers are united in their opposition to popular struggle. They seek to impose the status quo at the expense of the interests of the working and popular classes. This is precisely why viewing the Syrian revolution only through the lens of imperialist competition and geo-political dynamics will not suffice.

> *This lens inherently obscures the political and socio-economic frustrations endured by the Syrian population that sparked the uprising.*

We need to rebuild anti-war movements, true ones, by starting a critical assessment of the past experiences, an honest one. This in the perspective of building an internationalist and progressive alternative for all that oppose all forms of authoritarian regimes and all foreign interventions while clearly supporting the self determination of popular masses and their struggles.

In other words revolutionary humanism.

Some sections of the Left and the anti-war movements have refused to act in solidarity with the Syrian uprising under

the pretext that “the main enemy is at home.” In other words, it is more important to defeat the imperialists and bourgeoisie in our own societies, even if that means implicitly supporting the Assad regime or the Russian state.

Among these sections of the Left, communist thinker Karl Liebknecht is frequently cited. Liebknecht is famous for his 1915 declaration that “the enemy is at home,” a statement made in condemnation of imperialist aggression against Russia led by his native Austria–Germany. In quoting Liebknecht, many have decontextualized his views. From his perspective, fighting against the enemy at home did not mean ignoring foreign regimes repressing their own people or failing to show solidarity with the oppressed.

Indeed, Liebknecht believed we must oppose our own ruling class’s push for war by “cooperating with the proletariat of other countries whose struggle is against their own imperialists.”

Among many Western leftists, there has been neither cooperation with the Syrian people nor collaboration with like-minded anti-war movements. They also have failed to oppose the policies of their own bourgeois states in crushing the revolution in Syria.

The Left must do better. Solidarity with the international proletariat means supporting Syrian revolutionaries against various international and regional imperialist forces, as well as the Assad regime, all of which are trying to put an end to a popular revolution for freedom and dignity.

No leftist organizations or anti-war movements today can ignore the necessity of supporting people in struggle, while opposing all foreign interventions (international and regional), especially from our own governments….

As Liebknecht said: “Ally yourselves to the international class struggle against the conspiracies of secret diplomacy,

against imperialism, against war, for peace within the socialist spirit.” We can exclude none of these elements from our struggle to build a progressive leftist platform on the Syrian conflict.

Do you believe that the above mentioned narratives and the inability to comprehend an active political and emancipatory struggle, succumb to perception suffering from orientalism, or maybe even racism and islamophobia? Is there a paternalistic approach which we simply cannot get rid of?

I think reasons are multiple and sometimes interlinked, whether specific leftist inheritage (stalinism, campism, “Thirld Worldism”) yes forms of racisms and orientalism, etc…

But moreover and more generally there is a skepticism in the possibility of mass collective action to achieve the goals of the people, of **power from below**. This concept, which is at the heart of revolutionary politics, faces profound skepticism from some sections of the left. This should not prevent us, however, from building our solidarity on this basis.

Following the same narrative we have witnessed a call to unite under the lesser evil pragmatism of the coalition between Putin,Assad and Iran in order to ensure stability. Which is the outcome of this alliance during the recent years and against whom it has been forged?
This perception of these sections of the left is completely wrong and destructive of the “lesser evil”. The solution to does not lie in the collaboration with authoritarian regimes like the Assad regime or collaboration with regional powers and international imperialist powers such as Russia, quite on the opposite.

I believe that we should analyse a State on its class basis and policies as rightly put by Pierre Frank, a French Trotskyist that wrote that: “Let us note that the greatest theoreticians of Marxism did not at all define the political

nature of a bourgeois regime by the positions which the latter held in the field of foreign policy but solely and simply by the position it occupied in relation to the classes composing the nation". On this basis Syria, Russia and Iran are clearly not allies of working class people. We can see in Syria their destructive and murderous role.

The less evil is actually the road of defeat and the maintenance of an unjust system in which the popular classes in the region live. The role of revolutionaries is not to choose between different imperialist and regional powers. Our role is to oppose the different counter revolutionary forces and build an independent front from these two forms of reactions and basing it on democratic, social, anti-imperialist basis and opposing all forms of discrimination and working for the radical change of society in a dynamic from below in which the working classes the agent of change.

In conclusion, given the clashes or collaboration between the forces of reaction, let's nor choose one form of the reaction, but support, build and organize a popular and radical alternative for the original objectives of the revolutions: democracy social justice and equality.

We Should oppose all foreign interventions. In addition, We must not imagine that the imperialist rivalries at the global level between the United States, China and Russia would be insurmountable for these powers, to the extent that these powers are in reality in relations of interdependence on many issues. All these regimes are bourgeois regimes that are and always will be the enemies of the popular revolutions, seeking to impose or strengthen a stable political context allowing them to accumulate and develop their political and economic capital in defiance of the popular classes. No regional or international power is a friend of the Syrian revolution as we have shown, just as it is not the imperialist contradictions that have been the source of the uprising in Syria or elsewhere as well in the region, but the political and socio-

economic frustrations endured by the popular classes.

The regime's refusal of any kind of opposition and the violence it has committed demonstrates that it has fascist tendencies. Were those evident and existing before the uprising and how did they interacted with the characteristics of the Syrian state and society?

The Assad despotic regime definitely has fascistic trends, demonstrated by its refusal of any kind of opposition and the violence it has committed. Regarding the nature of the Assad regime, I would argue it is a despotic, capitalist and patrimonial state ruling through violent repression and using various policies such as sectarianism, tribalism, conservatism, and racism to dominate society and mobilize a cross-class popular base linked through sectarian, regional, tribal and clientelist connections to defend the regime on a reactionary basis.

The patrimonial nature of the state means the centers of power (political, military and economic) within the regime are concentrated in one family and its clique, similar to Libya and the Gulf monarchies for example, therefore pushing the regime to use all the violence at its disposal to protect its rule.

It is therefore very far from being socialist, anti-imperialist and secular as presented by some among sectors of the western left, often ignorant of Syria.

Given the example of Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan some time ago, the USA intervention is more than catastrophic. Invasions became synonymous with US, it went to war against communism and now it leads war against islamist extremists. What is their goal in the region? How did the election of Trump affect US policies in the region, if it did? What should we expect and prepare for?

Let's be clear we should oppose as well all the interventions

of Washington in the region that are not made in the interest of the popular classes. The recent wars you mentioned or its support for different dictatorships in the region and their actions demonstrate this.

American policy is mired in a host of contradictions that flow from its weakened position after its setback in Iraq and the contradictory foreign policy between Trump and some sectors of US foreign affairs administration. Of course, the U.S. remains the most important power in the world, but it has witnessed a relative decline against international and regional rivals, particularly in the Middle East.

The failure of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global economic and financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 were severe blows to the hegemony of the U.S. This left more space for other imperialist powers like China and Russia, but also benefited regional powers throughout the world. The relative decline of the U.S. allowed all of these states to act more autonomously and even at times contrary to U.S. interests.

This is particularly visible in the Middle East. Russia has been able to increase its influence and play a significant role in Syria in saving the Assad regime, while various regional states like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel have played a growing role in the region, intervening in the revolutionary processes in support of various actors in conflict with popular demands for democracy, social justice and equality.

US main policies in the Middle East are to defeat ISIS military and oppose Iranian influence in the region. At the same time, they want to come back to a form of stability in the region while undermining forces like Iran.

Like other imperialist and regional powers they want an end to the revolutionary processes in the region.

We are facing a complex situation but we jump easily to

conclusions and side-taking. How can we serve the main struggle, in terms of internationalist solidarity, which is rather obvious: opposition to all imperialist and authoritarian actors intervening in Syria?

Yes, I agree with this conclusion.

Multiple things can be done. I think progressives should call for an end to the war, which has created terrible suffering. It has led to massive displacement of people within the country and driven millions out of it as refugees. The war only benefits the counter-revolutionary forces on all sides. From both a political and humanitarian perspective, the end of the war in Syria is an absolute necessity.

Likewise, we must reject all the attempts to legitimize Assad's regime, and we must oppose all agreements that enable it to play any role in the country's future. A blank check given to Assad today will encourage future attempts by other despotic and authoritarian states to crush their populations if they come to revolt.

We have to guarantee as well the rights of civilians within Syria, particularly preventing more forced displacements and securing the rights of refugees (right of return, right for financial compensations in case of destruction of their houses, justice for the losses of their relatives, etc.).

Assad and his various partners in the regime must be held accountable for their crimes. The same goes for the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces and other armed groups.

> *We need to support the democratic and progressive actors and movements against both sides of the counter-revolution: the regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents.*

We have to build a united front based on the initial objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice, and

equality, saying no to sectarianism and no to racism.

We of course need to oppose all imperialist and authoritarian actors intervening in Syria.

In their own countries, leftists internationally should also struggle:

-for the opening of borders for migrants and refugees and against building walls or transforming Europe for example into a fortress that would turn the Mediterranean Sea into a cemetery for migrants

-against all forms of Islamophobia and racism

-against all cooperation of Western states with despotic regimes and the Apartheid, colonial and racist state of Israel (in this latter case, support BDS campaigns)

-against more “security” and anti-democratic policies promoted in the name of “the war against terrorism.”

We must be clear on one thing, the impunity given to the continuous murderous crimes of Assad’s despotic regime with the assistance and/or complicity of international imperialist powers encourages other dictators and authoritarian regimes to repress violently their own people. This participates as well in a global international trend of authoritarianism present throughout the world, including among liberal democracies in the Western countries, with the advancement and deepening of neo-liberalism.