

# The Syrian Revolution and Syria Today

## Interview with Ghayath Naisse

Ghayath Naisse is a Syrian revolutionary, interviewed by Memet Uludag of the IMR editorial board.

**IMR: The Revolution of 2011. More than 6 years on since 2011, the whole world sees only the fighting, destruction and the refugees in Syria. The events of 2011 and the revolutionary uprising are almost forgotten. Can you tell us about the conditions in Syria within which the uprising started and the revolt of 2011? What is the nature of the Assad regime? Was Syria a paradise before the revolution started? What was the Syrian revolution about and how and how did it start?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** Syria was governed by the dictator Hafez Assad following a coup in November 1970. Hafez was the father of the current dictator Bashar. Hafez overturned the left wing of the Baath party which was in power. He installed a ‘Bonapartist’ regime arising from the weakness of the Syrian bourgeoisie and of the working class. On the socio-economic side he installed a market economy, but limited and controlled by the state, ‘the nomenklatura’. At the same time he kept state support for immediate necessities, such as free education and a health system. To consolidate his rule Hafez relied on two mechanisms: repression and general corruption. He repressed all opposition – political parties, civil society associations and trade unions. He copied the political system of North Korea - ‘popular’ organisations affiliated to the regime and the cult of personality. He transformed himself into an eternal leader. The whole of Syria was muzzled and controlled by multiple security services. In addition Hafez Assad, the father of Bashar, rebuilt the army around himself and his family, as a Praetorian guard, using it to create family, regional and confes-

sional links. Hafez Assad was able to recreate a ‘new’ bourgeoisie, linked organically to his regime. He was also able to integrate the official religious and denominational hierarchy. At a regional and international level the Assad regime established renewed links with the most reactionary regimes in the region, Saudi Arabia and the petrodollar monarchies. He crushed the progressive Lebanese and Palestinian movements, and renewed links with the US, while remaining a loyal ally of the ex-USSR. One strategy alone guides the Assad regime – the survival and maintenance of his family in power at all costs... This explains the ease of Bashar’s climb to power after the death of Hafez in June 2000. In twenty minutes, the Syrian constitution was amended to lower the age of presidential candidates from 40 to 35, the then age of Bashar Assad. At the same time he was promoted from colonel to marshall in the army, the most rapid rise in the history of the Syrian army. Syria was no longer a republic, it was transformed into a monarchical, dynastic ‘republic’. From 2000-2010, Bashar Assad the current dictator instituted rapid and deep socio-economic changes. With much arrogance he put in train antisocial neoliberal policies, the most aggressive in the region: privatisation of the education and health systems and of industry - the suppression of all social gains. In ten years half the Syrian population had fallen into poverty, with a rate of unemployment over 20%, affecting two of every three degree holders. The new bourgeoisie of ‘businessmen’ linked to the regime was reassured and reinforced. In 2010 72% of GDP went to the bourgeoisie, of which 60% went to financial groups belonging to Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of the dictator Bashar. Growing popular opposition emerged from 2004 to 2010 against the antisocial and repressive policies of the regime. Bashar, in contrast to his

father, depended less on the Baath party and more on the multiple services of security and repression. A large part of the impoverished population could no longer live with the degraded standard of life. All the elements for a social explosion existed in 2010, waiting for a spark. Two events marked the start of the revolution. The first, during the month of February 2011, a young car driver, in the Al Hariqa district in the centre of Damascus, was beaten up by the police for a minor traffic offence. Hundreds of people spontaneously assembled to protest and chant – the Syrian people will no longer submit! It was an indicator of what was to come a month later. The second, at the beginning of March 2011, some fifteen children in the city of Daraa in the south of the country were arrested and tortured by the security services for painting on walls the slogans of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions – the people want the fall of the regime. The arrests of these young children led to big demonstrations on the 18 March 2011, initially in that city and subsequently in all the big cities of Syria.

**IMR: From Revolution to Sectarian Conflict, Is it right to say that the 2011 revolution has not succeeded and has turned into an armed sectarian conflict?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** To say that the revolution has failed to overthrow the regime is obvious – but to conclude that it is now only a sectarian conflict is an unjust and incorrect shortcut. To go back to the train of events. Two phenomena led to the militarisation of the revolution from autumn 2011. The first was the extreme violence of the regime against peaceful protestors in May 2011 – more than five thousand killed, fifteen thousand wounded and tens of thousands, around 60,000, arrested. In reaction to the violence of the regime some of the protestors armed themselves to protect the demonstrations. In addition, at about the same time, thousands of soldiers refused to fire on the protestors and joined the rebel-

lion with their weapons – creating a Free Syrian Army as a local and popular phenomenon. By the start of 2012 the regime had lost control of over 60% of the country, it was weakened to the point of collapse. At that point we see the convergence of two strategies. First, that of the regime which started using tanks, armoured cars, the air force and SCUD missiles against the rebel areas, villages and cities. It was a scorched earth strategy to destroy the infrastructure and homes of the population, forcing interior and exterior migration. In 2011-12 the regime stirred up sectarian hatreds and freed all the jihadists from prison. These jihadists would find themselves several months later leading the large confessional military organisations such as Jabhat Al Nusra, Ahar Al Sham and Jaish Al Islam. The Assad regime did everything to abort a popular revolution for liberty, equality and social justice. This objective was also the strategy of the regional powers, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Iran. The first supported the most reactionary Islamic groups and Iran supported the regime. Each of these countries are intervening actively in Syria to defend their own interests, taking advantage of the relative retreat of the USA following its defeat in Iraq in 2011, which gave these regional powers greater autonomy of action. The hegemony of the reactionary armed forces became obvious in 2013, particularly after the emergence of ISIS at the expense of the revolutionary forces. It is the advance of the counter revolution on multiple fronts and the retreat of the revolution. This gave the excuse to the American administration in September 2014 to intervene militarily under the banner of the war against ISIS. It was the same pretext used by Putin's Russia, from October 2015, to militarily intervene in Syria. In effect we can describe the Syrian situation today as 'the carnival of reactions'. However don't misunderstand me, the popular revolutionary movement remains active and living.

**IMR: Syria today. The current situ-**

**ation in Syria and the wider Middle-East is fast changing. It is confusing for many people who may not know much about it. There are so many sides and different forces in a complex conflict. With the big imperialist powers such as the US and Russia, the regional forces such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia; the Assad regime and various other forces within Syria such as ISIS, can you give us a general description of the situation in Syria at the moment? What are the different forces and armed groups?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** I have described the outline of the opposing forces in Syria. The fact is that the territory of Syria as well as its population is, since almost five years, fragmented: one part, under the control of the regime comprising the majority of the current Syrian population with the largest cities in the country, called by the regime La Syrie Utile, ‘useful Syria’, A second part in the east of the country is under the control of ISIS and the reactionary forces such as Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar Al Sham in the Idlib region and Jaish Al Islam close to Damascus. A third which we call Rojava comprises three cantons, two in the northeast and one in the northwest. The democratic Kurdish and Arab movement are largely in control of this region. In each of these three areas the dynamic of the popular and revolutionary movement is still living, but they are for the most part separated, distinct and unequal. The confrontation is military against ISIS; it is both military and popular in the areas controlled by the other reactionary forces and by the regime. Frequently we take part in demonstrations in cities controlled by Al Nusra like the towns of Idlib, Maarat Al Numan, Izaz and Albab. We also take part in the frequent demonstrations against the regime like those in the town of Alswayda in the south of the country. Our role, as revolutionary socialists, is to unify the three sectors of the popular struggle and to centralise them. Regarding the international powers,

the largest imperialist powers, American and Russian, are intervening in Syria. Russia is defending its last ally in the region and its military bases in Tartous and Humaimim. It is also attempting its return on the international scene as one of the two great powers of the world. For American imperialism, its ‘war against ISIS’ gives it a pretext to return to the region after its defeat in Iraq; in addition the Americans have a military presence they did not have previously. The American war is a ‘low cost’ war, with very few troops on the ground. The regional powers are all living an internal crisis; Turkey of the AKP is happy to control the strip of territory dividing the three cantons of Rojava, and is going through an authoritarian shift following the attempted coup last July. Saudi Arabia is stuck in an unending war in Yemen and its hegemonic role in the Arab countries is contested by the small petrol state of Qatar, which explains in part the recent crisis of the Gulf states. Iran is the regional power the most implicated in Syria through Hizbollah. For Iran it is the defence of its regional influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. To summarise, each imperialist and regional power, has links with armed groups including the regime itself.

**IMR: A war between jihadists and Assad regime? In the West, especially in mainstream politics and media, but also in some of the left circles the situation in Syria is often described as ‘a war between jihadists and Assad regime’? Is this true? Are the only anti-regime forces the various jihadists or are there other progressive forces? Is this a war between secularism and jihadists? Are there still revolutionary forces in Syria?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** In effect, those on the left that say that the situation in Syria is a war between the regime and jihadists, reduce the Syrian reality to a simple immoral justification for their position, whether they want it or not, in favour of a bloody bourgeois dictatorship. In 2011 the Syr-

ian popular masses revolted against the oligarchy in power. During that revolution the masses created, from below, bodies of self-organisation – the coordination committees. They also created bodies for self-management – the local councils. The exceptional violence of the regime and the advance of reactionary counter revolutionary forces have given a hard blow to the revolution, but the coordination committees and the local councils still exist and are active. In addition there are numerous democratic and progressive forces in the country. They vary from a position which accepts a period of transition with elements of the regime, to a more radical position which rejects all negotiations with the regime. The activity of this opposition is neglected in the media in favour of the bourgeois elements and dependents of the regional powers – the national coalition and the high negotiating commission. The current situation in Syria can be summarised as multiple counter revolutionary forces that are killing each other, and imperialist interventions, all against the isolated and weakened Syrian revolutionary forces. For that reason discussions are taking place among some of the progressive Syrian forces to create an action alliance with the aim of changing the current balance of forces and to open a better, progressive, future for our people.

**IMR: Trump and Syria. Trump is arming the Kurdish forces in the north. He has also ordered an airstrike against Assad. How do you interpret Trump's ongoing intervention in Syria?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** The Kurdish people in Syria, like those in the other countries which make up Kurdistan, have lived with discrimination and national oppression for a very long time. They are almost the only people in the Middle East other than the Palestinians who have not been able to establish their own national state, apart from a short lived state at Mahabad in the early twentieth century. The Syrian revolution of 2011 opened up all of Syrian society. It opened a

perspective for the development and blooming of the Kurdish national movement. The experience in Rojova is very important and rich in lessons. It requires our internationalist solidarity, but critical solidarity so that it flourishes and deepens. We must also help it link with the other two revolutionary sectors in Syria. Every new revolutionary experience in Syria is objectively subject to the effects of war, blockade, the destruction of infrastructure, attacks and the pressure of counter revolutionary forces, and of those of the regional and imperialist powers. A mobilisation, from below, by the working masses, of all the oppressed in Syria is required to face these attacks, together with a common revolutionary strategy. You can't criticise the PYD for accepting American aid against ISIS, as the Kurdish national movement has been able to resist the attacks by ISIS and defeat it in wide areas. Nevertheless everyone understands obviously, and the comrades of Rojova know, that the American administration is only a tactical ally, not worthy of confidence. They must depend, essentially, on the Arab and Kurdish masses and the popular power being established in the country. For the Trump administration the objective is not humanitarian as it pretends, but to establish a presence in Syria with military bases connected to their military presence in Iraq, and to block the extension of Iranian influence.

**IMR: Calls for intervention by the 'international community': What would you say to those who out of desperation and desire to help call for intervention by the international community?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** My reply to those who call for an international intervention is short and simple. You are calling for something that exists already. International intervention exists today in Syria with its procession of more civilian deaths, of more destruction of the country, and which has led to the territorial fragmentation of Syria. The call must be; withdrawal of all foreign forces and mili-

tias from Syria.

**IMR: Syria Peace Talks. Russia, Turkey and Iran have signed 'safe zones' deal for Syria. They are also the main sponsors of so called 'Syria peace talks' in Kazakhstan. Can you tell us your views on these?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** I think that Russia, like the regime, does not believe in a democratic transition. The political negotiations in Geneva are going nowhere. They are replaced by the negotiations with several war lords in Astana in Kazakhstan to better manage the zones of armed conflict. The only advantage of these negotiations is to lower the intensity of suffering for the civilian population, but they don't offer any democratic outcome.

**IMR: Refugees, The refugee crisis has shaped European domestic politics. The EU has implemented very harsh closed border policies. What do you think about the European refugee policies?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** To be honest, with the partial exception of Germany, the policies of the EU in relation to the waves of immi-

gration by a population fleeing the greatest humanitarian catastrophe since the Second World War, are shameful and scandalous. Closing one's eyes does not make the dramatic reality disappear, not wanting to see doesn't wash conscience.

**IMR: The Future, How does the future look for the revolutionary left in Syria? Are you optimistic?**

**Ghayath Naisse:** In brief, not to be able to build strong revolutionary organisations at revolutionary, and even counter revolutionary moments, would be a setback. It is an immense opportunity for us to work, struggle and organise. Revolutionary socialist organisations were the most pertinent in analysis and actions in the years of revolution in the region. The socio-economic and political dynamics that were at the origin of those revolutions have not been resolved, therefore we can expect other waves of popular mobilisation and other revolutionary conflicts with the established order and the ruling classes. Continue our struggles, get organised, engage in the actual fights and prepare for fights to come. In that sense, I am optimistic.