

Syrian Anarchist Challenges the Rebel/Regime Binary View of Resistance

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As the US intensifies its push for military intervention in Syria, virtually the only narrative available swings from the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad to the role of Islamist elements within the resistance. Further, where dissent with the US position appears, much of it hinges on the contradiction of providing support for Al Qaeda-linked entities seeking to topple the regime, as though they represent the only countervailing force to the existing dictatorship. But as Jay Cassano recently wrote for tech magazine Fast Company, the network of unarmed, democratic resistance to Assad's regime is rich and varied, representing a vast web of local political initiatives, arts-based coalitions, human rights organizations, nonviolence groups and more. (The Syria Nonviolence Movement created an online, interactive map to demonstrate this intricate network of connections.)

Meanwhile, the writing and dispatches of Syrian anarchists have been enormously influential in other Arab struggles, with anarchists tortured to death in Assad's prisons memorialized in the writing of Palestinians, and at demonstrations for Palestinian political prisoners held in Israel. Two key features of this unfolding warrant close attention: the manner in which anarchists in the Arab world are increasingly staging critiques and interventions that upend the contradictions held up as justification for US foreign policy, and the ongoing conversations between anti-authoritarian movements in the Arab world that bypass and remain unmediated by Western reference points. Whether Syrian anarchists' insistence on self-determination as a central organizing principle can withstand the immediate reality of violence or the leverage of foreign interests remains an open question.

Nader Atassi is a Syrian political researcher and writer originally from Homs, currently living between the United States and Beirut. He runs the blog Darth Nader, reflecting on events within the Syrian revolution. I talked him into chatting about its anarchist traces, and the prospect of US intervention.

Joshua Stephens for Truthout: Anarchists have been both active in and writing from the Syrian revolution since the get-go. Do you have any sense of what sort of activity was happening prior? Were there influential threads that generated a Syrian articulation of anarchism?

Nader Atassi: Due to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime, there was always very little space to operate before the revolution began. However, in terms of anarchism in the Arab world, many of the most prominent voices were Syrians'. Despite there being no organizing that was explicitly "anarchist," Syrian bloggers and writers with anarchist influences were becoming increasingly prominent in the "scene" in the last decade or so. Mazen Kamalmaz is a Syrian anarchist who has written a lot over the last few years. His writings contain a lot of anarchist theory applied to contemporary situations, and he was a prominent voice in Arab anarchism long before the uprising began. He's written a good deal in Arabic, and recently gave a talk in a cafe in Cairo titled "What is Anarchism?"

In terms of organizing, the situation was different however. In the tough political landscape of an authoritarian regime, many had to get creative and exploit openings they saw in order to organize any type of movement, and this led to a de facto decentralized mode of organizing. For example, student movements erupted in Syrian universities during the second Palestinian intifada and the Iraq War. This was a type of popular discontent that the regime tolerated. Marches were organized to protest the Iraq War, or in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada. Although many members of the mukhabarat infiltrated those movements and monitored them closely, this was a purely spontaneous eruption on the part of the students. And although the students were well aware how closely they were being watched (apparently, mukhabarat used to follow the marches with a notepad, writing down what slogans were being chanted and being written on signs), they used this little political space they were given to operate in order to gradually address domestic issues within the regime-sanctioned protests about foreign issues.

One of the most daring episodes I've heard of is when students at Aleppo University, in a protest against the Iraq War, raised signs with the slogan "No to the Emergency Law" (Syria has been under Emergency Law since 1963). Such actions were unheard of at the time. Many of the students who spontaneously emerged as charismatic organizers from within those protests before the uprising began disappearing very early on in the current uprising. The regime was wary of those activist networks that were created as a result of those previous movements and thus immediately cracked down on those peaceful activists that it knew may be a threat to them (and at the same time, it became more lenient with the jihadi networks, releasing hundreds of them from prison in late 2011). Aleppo University, as it so happens, has a very well-known student movement in favor of the uprising, so much so that it has been dubbed "University of the Revolution." The regime would later target the university, killing many students in the School of Architecture.

You recently wrote on your blog about possible US intervention as a sort of corollary to Iranian and Russian intervention on behalf of Assad, and Islamist intervention in revolutionary movements. Much as with Egypt recently, anarchists seem something of signature voice against two unsatisfactory poles within mainstream coverage – a voice preoccupied with self-determination. Is that a fair understanding?

Yes, I believe it is, but I would clarify a few things, as well. In the case of Syria, there are many who fit that description; not only anarchists, but Trotskyists, Marxists, leftists, and even some liberals. Also, this iteration of self-determination is based on autonomy and decentralization, not Wilsonian notions of "one people" with some kind of nationalist, centralized self-determination. It is about Syrians being able to determine their own destinies not in the nationalist sense, but in the micro-political sense. So for example, Syrian self-determination doesn't mean one track which all the Syrians follow, but each person determining their own track, without others in-

terfering. So Syrian Kurds, for example, also have the right to full self-determination in this conception, rather than forcing them into an arbitrary Syrian identity and saying that all the people that fall under this identity have one destiny.

And when we talk about parties, such as the regime, but also its foreign allies, and the jihadis who are against Syrian self-determination – this is not because there is one narrative of Syrian self-determination and jihadis are against it. Rather, they want to impose their own narrative on everyone else. The regime works and has always worked against Syrian self-determination because it holds all political power and refuses to share it. The Islamists work against Syrian self-determination not by virtue of them being Islamists (which is why a lot of liberals oppose them), but because they have a vision of how society should function, and want to forcefully impose that on others whether those people consent to it or not. This is against Syrian self-determination, as well. The allies of the Assad regime, Iran, Russia and various foreign militias, are against Syrian self-determination because they are determined to prop up this regime due to the fact that they've decided their geopolitical interests supersede Syrians deciding their destiny for themselves.

So yes, the mainstream coverage always tries to portray people as belonging to some kind of binary. But the Syrian revolution erupted as people demanding self-determination from the one party that was denying it to them: the regime of Bashar al Assad. As time passed, other actors came onto the scene who also denied Syrians their self-determination, even some who fought against the regime. But the position was never simply to be against the regime for the sake of being against the regime, just as I presume that in Egypt, our comrades' position is not being against the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] for the sake of being against the Ikhwan. The regime took self-determination away from the people, and any removal of the regime that results in replacing it with someone else who will dominate Syrians should not be seen as a success. As in Egypt, when the Ikhwan came to power, those who considered them an affront to the revolution, even if they weren't felool [Mubarak loyalists], kept repeating the slogan "al thawra mustamera" ["the revolution continues"]. So too will it be in Syria if, after the regime is gone, a party comes to power that also denies Syrians their right to determine their own destiny.

When I interviewed Mohammed Bamyeh this year, he talked about Syria as a really interesting example of anarchism being a driving methodology on the ground. He pointed out that when one hears about organization within the Syrian revolution, one hears about committees and forms that are quite horizontal and autonomous. His suggestion seems borne out by what people like Budour Hassan have brought to light, documenting the life and work of Omar Aziz. Do you see that influence in what your comrades are doing and reporting?

Yes, this comes back to how anarchism should be seen as a set of practices rather than an ideology. Much of the organizing within the Syrian uprising has had an anarchistic approach, even if not explicit. There is the work that the martyr Omar Aziz contributed to the emergence of the local councils, which Tahrir-ICN and Budour Hassan have documented very well. Essentially these councils were conceived by Aziz as organizations where self-governance and mutual aid could flourish. I believe Omar's vision did breathe life into the way local councils operate, although it is worth noting that the councils have stopped short of self-governance, opting instead for focusing on media and aid efforts. But they still operate based on principles of mutual aid, cooperation and consensus.

The city of Yabroud, halfway between Damascus and Homs, is the Syrian uprising's commune. Also a model of sectarian coexistence, with a large Christian population living in the city, Yabroud has become a model of autonomy and self-governance in Syria. After the regime security forces withdrew from Yabroud in order for Assad to concentrate elsewhere, residents stepped in to fill the vacuum, declaring "we are now organizing all the aspects of the city life by ourselves [sic]." From decorating the city to renaming the school "Freedom School," Yabroud is certainly what many Syrians, myself included, hope life after Assad will look like. Other areas controlled by reactionary jihadis paint a potentially grimmer picture of the future, but nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are alternatives. There's also a hardcore network of activists located all over the country, but mainly in Damascus, called the "Syrian Revolutionary Youth." They're a secretive organization, and they hold extremely daring protests, oftentimes in the very center of regime-controlled Damascus, wearing masks and carrying signs and flags of the Syrian revolution – often accompanied with Kurdish flags (another taboo in Syria).

In the city of Darayya in the suburbs of Damascus, where the regime has waged a vicious battle ever since it fell to rebels in November 2012, some residents have decided to come together and create a newspaper in the midst of all the fighting, called Enab Baladi (meaning Local Grapes, as Darayya is famous for its grapes). Their paper focuses both on what is happening locally in Darayya and what is happening in the rest of Syria. It's printed and distributed for free throughout the city. [The] principles [of] self-governance, autonomy, mutual aid and cooperation are present in a lot of the organizations within the uprising. The organizations that operate according to some of those principles obviously don't comprise the totality of the uprising. There are reactionary elements, sectarian elements, imperialist elements. But we've heard about that a lot, haven't we? There are people doing great work based on sound principles who deserve our support.

How do you think US intervention would ultimately affect the makeup or dynamics of the revolution?

I think, in general, intervention has affected the uprising very negatively, and I think US intervention won't be any different. But I think how this specific intervention will ultimately affect the makeup or dynamics of the revolution depends on the specific scope of the US strikes. If the US strikes the way they are saying they are going to, that is, "punitive," "limited," "surgical," "symbolic" strikes, then this won't leave any significant changes on the battlefield. It may, however, give the Assad regime a propaganda victory, as then it can claim that it was "steadfast against US imperialism." Dictators who survive wars against them have a tendency to declare victories simply on the basis of surviving, even if in reality they were on the losing side. After Saddam Hussein was driven out of Kuwait by the US, Saudi Arabia and others, he remained in power for 12 more years, 12 years that were filled with propaganda about how Saddam remained steadfast during "the mother of all battles."

If the strikes end up being tougher than what is currently being discussed, for one reason or another, and they do make a significant change on the battlefield, or do significantly weaken the Assad regime, then I think the potential negative effects will be different. I think this will lead to a future Syrians won't have a hand in determining. The US may not like Assad, but they have many times expressed that they believe that regime institutions should remain intact in order to ensure stability in a future Syria. In short, as many have noted, the US wants "Assadism without Assad." They want the regime without the figure of Assad, just like what they got in Egypt, when Mubarak stepped down but the "deep state" of the military remained, and just like what

happened in Yemen where the US negotiated for the president to step down but for everything to remain largely the same. The problem with this is Syrians chanted, “The People Demand the Downfall of the Regime,” not just Assad. There is consensus across the board, from US to Russia to Iran, that no matter what happens in Syria, regime institutions should remain intact. The same institutions that were built by the dictatorship. The same institutions that plundered Syria and provoked the popular discontent that started this uprising. The same institutions that are merely the remnants of French colonialism. Everyone in Syria knows that the US’s preferred candidates for leadership roles in any future Syria are those Syrians who were part of the regime and then defected: Ba’athist bureaucrats turned neoliberal technocrats turned “defectors.” These are the people the US would have rule Syria.

Syrians have already sacrificed so much. They have paid the highest price for their demands. I don’t want all that to go to waste. In the haste to get rid of Assad, the symbol of the regime, I hope the regime is not preserved. Syria deserves better than a bunch of ragtag institutions and a bureaucracy built by dictators who wished to keep the Syrian people under control and pacified. There should be no reason to preserve institutions that have participated in the looting of the country and the killing of the people. And knowing that that’s what the US desires for Syria, I reject any direct involvement by the US. If the US wants to help, it can start by using diplomacy to talk to Russia and Iran and convince them to stop the war so that Syrians themselves can determine what is the next course of action. But US intervening directly is outsiders determining the next stage for Syrians, something I believe should be rejected.

What can folks outside of Syria do to provide support?

For people outside, it’s tough. In terms of material support, there’s very little that can be done. The only thing that I can think of that’s possible on a large scale is discursive/intellectual support. The left has been very hostile to the Syrian uprising, treating the worst elements of anti-regime activity as if they are the only elements of it, and accepting regime narratives at face value. What I’d ask people to do is to help set that record straight and show that there are elements of the Syrian uprising that are worth supporting. Help break that harmful binary that the decision is between Assad or Al Qaeda, or Assad and US imperialism. Be fair to the history and sacrifices of the Syrian people by giving an accurate account. Perhaps it’s too late, and the hegemonic narratives are too powerful in the present to overcome. But if people start now, maybe the history books can at least be fair.

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