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Interview with Apatris on the Syrian revolution

Leila Al Shami

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The following is the English version of an interview with Leila Al Shami originally published in Apatris (a Greek anarchist newspaper). It gives a general overview of the Syrian revolution, including questions of military intervention, the situation in Kurdish areas, anarchist currents within the popular struggle and suggestions for solidarity

What was the social, economic and political situation in Syria before the uprising?

The Baath party came to power in 1963, following a military coup. At that time Baathism was a mixture of Pan-Arab, Arab nationalist and Arab socialist ideology. Hafez Al Assad came to power in 1970 through an internal coup and ruled for 40 years. He dismantled much of the socialist outlook of the party (the coup was against its left-wing faction) and he built up a patriotic capitalist class. Under his rule a leadership cult was formed, Syria became a totalitarian police state and there was mass persecution of political dissidents. Whilst the Baath party formed a coalition with 6 small mainly communist/socialist /

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nationalist parties to make up the National Progressive Front the Baath party dominates and in effect it is a one-party state.

When Hafez died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited the dictatorship. He was originally seen as a reformist and this climate of optimism gave birth to a movement known as the Damascus Spring. It was an intellectual led movement asking for political reforms such as the release of political prisoners and the right to form political parties and civil organizations (which are either banned or subject to strict control). It also called for an end to Emergency Law, in place since 1963, which effectively suspended all constitutional rights of citizens and empowered security forces. By Autumn 2001 the key leaders of this movement were in prison and hopes for political reforms ended. Under Bashar there was wide-spread persecution of political and human rights activists. Arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances were common practice. The Kurds (9 per cent of the population) also suffered severe repression at the hands of the state. An uprising of Kurds took place in March 2004, many were killed and more than 2 thousand were arrested. Draconian measures controlled and censored both Internet and press.

Following the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, Bashar implemented wide ranging neo-liberal economic reforms. State farms were privatized, a private banking system was introduced, there was a promotion of private-sector led investment with key industrial sectors brought under private sector control, and a reduction in subsidies. International investment flooded in particularly from the Gulf. These reforms were not accompanied by policies to re-distribute wealth or ensure social protection. Inequality grew between the rich and poor and the urban/rural divide was exacerbated.

Assad loyalists and the business class benefited from these policies. Bashar's inner circle, including from his family and members of the Alawite sect to which he belongs became very wealthy. It is estimated that Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlouf,

a section of the left. It is important to challenge the simplistic binary narrative that we have to choose between the Assad regime and Al Qaeda. There are no chocolate box revolutions. In the course of any revolutionary process numerous competing actors will emerge, many of them reactionary. We have to stand in solidarity with those whose vision we share, right up until the last person left and there are many positive initiatives to support in Syria.

In terms of Greece specifically, many Syrian refugees have been coming to Greece and we have also witnessed tragic incidents of them drowning at sea. It is important to challenge the Dublin Regulation which Greece has signed and the practices of border police including the illegal detention of refugees and mistreatment in detention. There have also been reports of armed special units firing on and threatening Syrian refugees to prevent them from landing in Greece. These people are fleeing unimaginable violence and conditions in Syria and have the right to be granted asylum and treated in a dignified and humane way. Once in Greece, solidarity can be given to Syrians, and refugees from other countries, to ensure they have housing and other basic needs provided.

across the region. No one nowadays is seriously talking about regime change. We expect a solution will be forced on the people where Assad goes but the regime stays in place.

Do you think their will be foreign military intervention in Syria?

Personally I don't believe the West has any real desire to get involved militarily in Syria. Syria is still a powerful state and has powerful allies. We heard talk of airstrikes for three weeks following the chemical attacks in Ghouta. I believe Obama was backed into a corner because he made his 'red line' conditions and did not want it to look like the US is becoming irrelevant in the region. The reality is US power is declining.

There already is foreign military intervention in Syria, and apart from the Al Qaeda affiliated militant Jihadis mentioned above, the intervention has mainly been on the side of the regime. Russia has given massive military support to Assad and there are Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria. Thousands of Shia Jihadi militants from Hizbollah are also fighting and have been involved in brutal attacks such as on the town of Qusair. Incidentally, Greek fascists from Black Lilly are also in Syria fighting for the regime. This is where anti-war and anti-intervention activists should focus their attention.

Finally, how can Greeks best stand in solidarity with the Syrian Uprising?

It is important that visible solidarity from outside is given to those in Syria that are still struggling to overthrow the tyranny of the regime and anarchists can give support to libertarian tendencies within the broader movement. After two and a half years of struggle and in the face of the regime's brutality and an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation, it is easy to understand that revolutionaries in Syria are tired. Over 130,000 have been killed, entire civilian neighborhoods destroyed, 2.2 million have fled the country, and tens of thousands are rotting in Assad's prisons. This is compounded when faced with the idiotic debates surrounding their struggle that has come from

controlled about 60% of the Syrian economy through his business interests. The Sunni and Christian bourgeois also benefited from these policies as the regime built economic ties with individuals from different communities to ensure their loyalty. Meanwhile the poor were disenfranchised and the cost of living rose. Syrians living under poverty line increased from 11 per cent in 2000 to 34.5 per cent in 2010 (7 million people) in rural areas it stood at 62 per cent. Unemployment rates were high, especially for the youth who lacked job opportunities.

Therefore which social groups were prominent in the outbreak of the revolt?

Inspired by the revolutionary wave sweeping the region, the uprising began in rural areas and cities with high poverty rates such as Deraa and Homs; those which had suffered the most from the neo-liberal project. The main Kurdish cities were also amongst the first to hold large protests. Apart from some small and daring protests, the centers of capital (Aleppo and Damascus) failed to join uprising for months and some (regime sponsored) protests were organized in support of Bashar.

Workers (despite the difficulties in organizing because of Baath domination of Unions) have played an important role in the movement. Successful general strikes and civil disobedience campaigns throughout December 2011 paralyzed large sections of the economy. The response of the Assad regime was to lay off more than 85,000 workers and close more than 187 factories between January and February 2012 (according to official figures).¹ The regime also increased wages to public sector staff in its attempt to crush the uprising.

The core of the grassroots opposition has been and remains the youth, mainly from the poor and middle-classes, in which women and diverse religious and ethnic groups play active roles. Many of these activists remain non-affiliated to

¹ Syria Freedom Forever, 'Sectarianism and the Assad regime in Syria' syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com

traditional political ideologies but are instead motivated by concerns for freedom, dignity and basic human rights. Their primary objective has remained the overthrow of the regime, rather than developing grand proposals for a future Syria.

What has been the role of anarchism in Syria and the Syrian Revolution?

Syrians have been at the forefront of the development of anarchism regionally. In the 19th century the main centers of Arab anarchism were Beirut, Alexandria and Cairo. The two primary periodicals for the dissemination of radical ideas in these cities were *Al Hilal* and *Al Muqtataf*, both established by Syrians. Syrian actors also brought anarchist ideas to the workers of these cities through radical theatre.

One of the leading contemporary Arab anarchists is Syrian, Mazen Km Al Maz. He has been writing regularly in Arabic on current affairs for the past decade, and has translated western anarchist literature into Arabic. Nader Atassi, is one Syrian anarchist who blogs in English under the name Darth Nader. Political organization has been restricted in Syria for decades and anarchist networks are small and emerging. Yet anarchist tendencies in the Syrian revolution have been the strongest we have seen in any of the Arab Spring countries and the experiments in autonomous self-organization outside of the boundaries of the state and independent of political or institutional leadership provide valuable lessons for anarchist organizing globally.

The main form of revolutionary organization in Syria has been through the development of local committees. Hundreds have been established in neighborhoods and towns across the country. This form of organization was inspired by Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz. He believed that it didn't make sense for revolutionaries to participate in protests by day and then return to their lives within the authoritarian structures of the state. Aziz advocated for radical changes to social relationships and organization in order to challenge the foundations of a sys-

The mainstream opposition in exile has sidelined the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish people, but the popular civil resistance has vocally supported the Kurdish right to self-determination. Kurds have played an active role throughout the uprising and there are many initiatives where Kurds and Arabs have joined together in their opposition to the Syrian regime and to fight against increasing sectarianism. For example in August, joint protests were held in the Ashrafiyah district of Aleppo calling for unity and an end to assaults carried out by extremist Jihadi groups. Recently, a campaign has been launched called "Khorzeh-Ana Akhuk" which in Kurdish and Arabic means "I am your brother" to promote unity and co-existence between Arabs and Kurds.

It is a fact that the Western forces have not essentially helped the rioters, while officially the Syrian regime has been blacklisted by them. Why do you believe this happened?

We should not expect support to be given to the popular resistance on the ground. No state has an interest in seeing a popular revolutionary movement succeed. The West, as well as Turkey and the Gulf States have recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the "legitimate" representatives of the Syrian people. They hope to influence the SNC in a way which is favorable to their long-term interests. It is important to note that the SNC has little legitimacy amongst revolutionaries inside Syria. It is often referred to as "the five star hotel opposition" and is criticized for being detached from realities on the ground, unable to unify to bring about meaningful change on the revolutions key demands, and influenced by outside agendas. Promises of support to the opposition from the West (including military support to the FSA) has been mainly empty rhetoric. There has been little will to find a political solution to this conflict or even take relatively simple actions such as giving adequate humanitarian assistance to the more than 2 million people living in squalid conditions in refugee camps

The civilian resistance against such groups is strong and we have seen wide-spread protests against them in cities where they are dominant such as Al Raqqa and Aleppo. The FSA is also engaged in battles with Al Qaeda affiliated groups and they were notably excluded from the Islamic Front. Whilst such groups will cause havoc in Syria and the region for a long time to come, I think the assumption that they can impose their vision on Syria in the future is grossly overstated. They are small in number, comprised mainly of foreigners and have no popular support base. Of course, the longer conflict occurs in Syria, the more they could increase in strength.

How are things right now in Syrian Kurdistan?

The Kurdish people have been denied their right to self determination and faced brutal repression by the state for decades. Since July 2012 the Syrian government left the majority of the Kurdish areas and there is now autonomous Kurdish government. Kurdish areas are governed by the Kurdish Supreme Committee which is an alliance between the main political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which dominates, and the smaller Kurdish National Council (KNC). There are major political divisions within the Syrian Kurdish community and rivalries between the main factions. The PYD has faced criticism for its authoritarian policies and specifically repression against Kurdish activists including pro-revolutionary youth activists and political activists from opposing parties. The PYD has also faced accusations of collaboration with the Assad regime.

Kurds have joined the FSA in the fight against Assad and others are part of Salafist brigades/the Islamic Front. But the strongest Kurdish militia is the YPG linked to the PYD. Periodically the YPG has been engaged in clashes with the FSA. Kurdish fighters have also been fighting militant Jihadi groups as Kurdish areas have suffered brutal assaults by such groups in recent months.

tem built on exploitation and oppression. His ideas have had a huge impact on revolutionary organization in Syria. In the local committees revolutionary activists engage in multiple activities, from documenting and reporting on violations carried out by the regime (and increasingly elements of the opposition) to organizing protests and civil disobedience campaigns (such as strikes and refusing to pay utility bills). They collect and provide aid and humanitarian supplies to areas under bombardment or siege. The committees operate as horizontally organized, autonomous, leaderless groups, made up of all segments of the society (including minorities such as Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds). They have been the foundation of the revolutionary movement based on principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid.

What are the external forces which are involved in the Syrian conflict?

There is a vicious geo-political struggle or proxy war being fought over Syria. On the global level this is taking place between the US and Russia and on the regional level between the Sunni axis (Gulf States) and Shia axis (Iran and Hizbullah). All of these actors are struggling to ensure that any outcome is favorable to their own interests and maintains or expands their power and hegemony in the region. There is also a violent counter revolution occurring inside Syria, with the rise of extremist Jihadi groups, many of them foreigners, who are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to impose their own religious agenda. None of these factors detract from the fact that there is also a popular struggle on the ground and revolutionary groups stand against both the regime and counter-revolutionary forces.

How are the rebels organized in the liberated areas?

I have explained above about the local committees being central to revolutionary organization. Also in areas liberated from the state Local Councils have been established which act as the primary civil administrative structure. These ensure the provi-

sion of basic services (such as electricity, health care, garbage disposal and water supply), coordinate with the activists of local committees and coordinate with the popular armed resistance to ensure security. They are often made up of the civilian activists that had participated in demonstrations as well as people selected for their technical or professional abilities. Many of these people come from the middle classes in contrast to the formal opposition in exile, comprised mainly of people from richer families, which explains some of the tension between these two groups and lack of outside support. There is no one model for the Local Councils, but they mainly follow some form of representative democratic model and free local elections have occurred in areas where they have been established, something that has not happened in Syria under four decades of Baath rule. Challenges include scarcity of resources, as very little aid has come in from outside which hinders the councils in fulfilling their functions and providing for citizens. In some areas councils have also struggled to maintain independence from armed groups and in areas where militant Jihadist groups (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and Jabhat al Nusra) are strong, such as parts of northern Syria, these groups have tried to set up parallel institutions such as Islamic courts.

How is the armed resistance structured?

The Syrian uprising was armed early on because the people faced a fascist regime that was prepared to use the full military force of the state to crush any opposition to its rule. Initially civilians took up arms and formed neighborhood militias to protect towns and protect demonstrators. On the 29 July 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by officers who defected from the regime because they refused to fire on protesters.

The FSA has two main components:

Former generals and soldiers of the regime. There are many different battalions and they are connected from local battalions to regional military councils, the FSA leadership and ul-

timately to the Syrian National Coalition (mainstream opposition in exile).

Parts of the civilian population that are against the regime. Many of these operate outside of the formal chain of command and are organized according to local affiliations. Some are openly critical of the FSA leadership and SNC leadership abroad.

There are FSA battalions that consist of Alawite Muslims, Kurds, Christians as well as Sunni Muslims. There are also women only battalions. These groups are united in the goal of overthrowing Assad and establishing a democratic state and the FSA leadership has a secular agenda.

There has also been a rise of more hardline Islamic or Salafi brigades which are not part of the Free Syrian Army structure. They are becoming an increasingly dominant presence in the armed opposition and recently the Islamic Front was formed bringing together the largest Islamist battalions. Whilst I see this as a worrying development despite the clear military advantages to creating unity amongst fighting forces, it still remains to be seen how the Islamic Front engages with the (overwhelmingly secular) civil resistance, FSA and political processes.

Is it true that the FSA is dominated by Al Qaeda?

There are two major militant Jihadi/Al-Qaeda linked groups operating in Syria; Jabhat Al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). They are a counter-revolutionary force, which are not fighting for the liberation of the Syrian people but rather to establish a global Islamic Caliphate based on their puritanical interpretation of Islam. These groups have much more sophisticated weaponry than the FSA, mainly supplied by private donors from Gulf countries. They have consolidated their hold on some northern areas and tried to impose their strict interpretation of Islam on the population. They have committed many abuses such as a detention of opposition activists, executions and sectarian killings.