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The war on terror and its new supporters

Leila Al Shami

7 November 2015

It's now been five weeks since Russia began its bombing campaign in support of the fascist regime in Syria, transforming a struggle against domestic tyranny into resistance against foreign invasion and occupation. The discourse used to justify Russia's intervention is just an extension of the 'War on Terror'. The Americans invaded and occupied Iraq and Afghanistan on the pretext of 'fighting terrorism', thus creating more terrorism and extremism, and now the Russians and Iranians are doing the same in Syria. The difference is that many of those who vocally opposed the first war on terror now remain silent or actively support this latest incarnation.

Of course 'terrorism' is a blanket term which the Syrian regime employs against any dissent. And the main targets of Russia's imperialist adventures have not been the Daesh (ISIS) fascists. Instead Russia's military might is directed at Syria's resistance militias and civilians living in liberated zones which have become death camps under the state's scorched earth tactics and crippling blockades. It's the working class suburbs and rural districts of Hama and Idlib, those that raged so fiercely

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Retrieved on 13th March 2025 from leilashami.wordpress.com

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against the regime, that are today being pounded by Russian airstrikes. The people attacked in Homs are those who defeated Daesh a year ago. More than 234 civilians including at least 83 children have perished under Russian airstrikes.¹ Hospitals have been targeted as well as bread distribution depots, civilian councils, and archaeological and historical sites. Tens of thousands have been driven from their homes, many the victims of previous displacements, now sheltering under trees or in caves as winter threatens.

Yet with all this fire power it seems that Assad will be unable to reassert his dominance over the three quarters of the country he has already lost. The resistance continues to make gains and liberate towns around Hama, even under Russian bombs, dealing a heavy blow to the state's demoralized troops. There is less cause for optimism in southern Aleppo, where the regime has made significant gains with its massive reliance on foreign Shia militias from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon on the ground, backed by Russia in the sky. But as Assad's Syrian 'Arab' Army is increasingly fragmenting and looks too weak to regain and hold lost territory, the resistance looks more unified than it has for a long time.

Those that only woke up to the tragedy unfolding in Syria when Daesh beheaded an American or refugees washed up on European shores will be unaware of the trajectory of Syria's heroic struggle; one fought against multiple enemies both domestic and foreign. This leads some to conclude that a revolution never took place; that it was all an Islamist or foreign plot. Others suggest Assad is the lesser evil – despite his responsibility for 96 percent of civilian deaths and the refugee crisis – and that 'stability' based on the security-military apparatus is more important than freedom. This revisionism is a betrayal of a popular uprising which saw men and women of all sects,

¹ NB. these figures are a week old before the massacres of civilians at market places in Douma, AlBoukamal and elsewhere

religions and backgrounds demand that the system oppressing them fall. People who took to the streets unarmed and faced the bullets and tanks of the state alone, at the cost of many lives. And when the revolution militarized in the face of such violence, when the regime's manipulations and terror created the specter of sectarianism and extremist Islamism, when warlords began to terrorize liberated areas and foreign states began to assert their hegemony over various factions, revolutionary Syrians were betrayed and abandoned. Their movement came to be judged solely on the strength of the counter-revolution. This skewed perception was one more victory for the international system of states.

Leading lights of the western left claim 'there are no good guys left in Syria'. This is an analysis driven by a generalizing orientalism, which sees all Arabs as the same – as a violent, backward people in need of external guidance. No distinction is made between combatants and non-violent activists, between secularists and Islamists, between moderates and extremists. Diversity in opinions, politics, culture, and means of struggle is seen as being the sole preserve of a western society. And of course ... the Arabs ... they surely need to be taught by enlightened westerners what imperialism means.

On 2 October the Local Coordination Committees released a statement condemning the Russian aggression and calling upon "all revolutionary forces and factions to unite by any means". All around the country Syrians living apocalyptic conditions have taken to the streets with the same demands. In Aleppo protesters gathered in the Tariq Al-Bab, Tel Rifaat and Salahudeen neighbourhoods. In Idlib people took to the streets in Ma'arat al-Nu'man and Kafranbel where Free Army fighters joined the regular Friday protests held by civilians. One banner read 'Putin! get your soldiers back safe, otherwise we send them to you in coffins.' Demonstrations have been also been held in Inkhil, Dera'a in the south, and in Damascus and its suburbs; in Saqba in the Eastern Ghouta, in Qaboun and in Douma

where one elderly man declares: “Syria is for us, not for the house of Assad, not for Russia, not for Iran, not for Lebanon”. There are plenty of Syrians who believe in self-determination, who still struggle for a life of dignity free from all totalitarianisms.

Meanwhile the authoritarian left continues to occupy itself with the chess game of states and the struggle for regional hegemony ... and the blood of Syrians flows.