

Assad's Syria

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On 15 March 2018 the war in Syria entered its eighth year without a solution. The ongoing situation in Syria has caused deep divisions in public opinion, as well as divisions within the international left. Today, as the social and economic reasons of the 2011 uprising are fading away from most analyses and debates, it is still very important to understand the conditions within which the revolt began. To understand the triggers of the revolution and its popular demands we also need to understand the nature of the Assad regime, among other things.

In this article, I would like to briefly look at the recent history of Syria and try to explain the nature of the Assad regime in terms of its social and economic policies. The revolutionary uprising has long been crushed by domestic and foreign counter-revolutionary forces. There are multiple reasons for the emergence of these forces and the defeat of the revolution. I am not going to deal with these as part of this article.

Various sources estimate the death toll in Syria to be between 350,000 and 500,000.¹⁷ There are more than 11 million Syrian refugees of which 6 million internally and 5 million externally displaced. More than 13 million people in Syria are in continuous need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ These figures alone make us think why the Syrians, who paid such a heavy price in the end, had risen up against the Assad regime.

Once a protestor, now a refugee

At one of the public meetings in Dublin, organised by United Against Racism, a Syrian refugee speaker had said, *"We went out onto the streets to protest. We wanted change. People wanted change for a long time. It was men, women, and families on the streets. In the beginning it was peaceful. But very soon we were attacked by the regime forces. We hadn't expected such a harsh response. We ended up hiding from these attacks. People were arrested, shot and killed."*

In 2016-17, there were mass protests in Ireland. What had begun as a mobilisation against the introduction of water charges had soon turned into protests against the government and its policies. People wanted change. People wanted the government to go. Nobody

would ever expect to see the armed forces of the state on the streets, shooting and killing people. The initial heavy-handed police response in local areas eventually disappeared. It wasn't because the Irish Government didn't want to stop the protests or send out more police but because Ireland was not Syria, it was not ruled by a regime like that in Syria.

Arab Spring

In 2011 uprisings began in various Arab countries that became known as the 'Arab Spring'. Protests had toppled the dictatorial presidents of Tunisia's and Egypt. This gave hope to Syrian people who wanted change. The revolts in Tunisia had begun with Mohamed Bouazizi (29 March 1984–4 January 2011), a Tunisian street vendor setting himself on fire against police brutality. The catalyst in Syria was the arrest and torture of a group of young boys in Daraa for writing a graffiti that read *"It's your turn, Doctor Bashar al-Assad"*. Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in outrage at the boys' arrests. The protestors were gunned down in horrific scenes that would be relayed around the world and spark an uprising involving hundreds of thousands of people across Syria.

Torture as the Norm

As widely documented, the Syrian security forces are so well-known for their torture methods that the US, under George W. Bush, called upon them to help interrogate suspected al Qaeda members. The faith of the Daraa boys was indeed not going to be any different than those arrested and sent to Syria by the American government.

A detailed interview in 2017 with survivors of rape and torture in Assad's prisons exposed the gruesome nature of the state security forces.^{19 20 21}

Following the 2008/9 global financial crash, as with the international Occupy Movement, the uprisings of Arab Spring were an inspiration for the global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. These revolts had emerged in countries that were under long standing powerful dictatorial regimes. Syria under the rule of Assad was no exception.

Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, following the death of his father Hafez al-Assad, who was the President of Syria from 1971 to 2000. Bashar is also the commander-in-chief of the Syrian Armed Forces

and the Regional Secretary of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party's in Syria.

A short political history of Syria

Syrian history, beginning with the independence from France in 1946 has been one of multiple military coups, social turmoil with different class interests emerging, power struggles between nationalists, communists and others that represented these interests, and ultimately the establishment of strong Ba'ath Party rule.

The period between 1946 and 1958 saw a number of economic and social reforms including reforms in labour laws and establishment of trade union membership and strike rights. But none of these were to be permanent gains under various ruling powers that followed. The revolt in 2011 was not the first uprising by Syrians. In 1951, following an uprising the year before the first congress of peasants was held in Aleppo.²² Peasants mobilised to bring about changes in their living conditions. Pressurised by the landlords to stop the land redistribution, the government eventually suppressed the peasant mobilisation. As a response to growing social unease, in 1958 a section of the army officers forced Syria into a union with Egypt, forming the United Arab Republic (UAR). Unopposed by the Communists, UAR was supported by the Ba'ath Party. This period, lasting until 1961, started a process of industrialisation, social welfare reforms, land distribution and nationalising of major industries. During the same period, independent workers' and peasants' organisations were increasingly targeted by the regime and strikes were banned. The unity between Egypt and Syria fell apart when the Syrians objected to their second-class status within the union. This was followed by a military coup by the Ba'athists in 1963. The new regime continued on with the industrialisation and nationalisation process with the state and bureaucracy increasingly taking control of industries and the wider economy. In an article published in *International Socialism*, Issue 135, Jonathan Maunder argues that, "*Syria's entry into the UAR and the 1963 coup can be seen as examples of what Tony Cliff called deflected permanent revolution, a deviation from the process of permanent revolution as outlined by the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky*".²³ Maunder, correctly concludes that, "*the results of this deflected permanent revolution were forms of state capital-*

ism, not socialism". Tony Cliff in his 1967 pamphlet "The struggle in the Middle East"²⁴ wrote, "*In Syria the Ba'ath regime has been more radical than Nasser's regime in the field of land reform. But neither Nasser nor the Ba'ath can ever become revolutionary or grow beyond their middle-class social basis. Their social base is the army officers, civil servants and teachers, sons of merchants and prosperous artisans, better-off peasants and small-scale landowners.*" Small in size and relatively unorganised the Syrian working class did not manage to establish itself as a leading force in society.

Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971, after an intra-party coup in 1970 that removed Salah Jadid, a Ba'athist army officer. He ruled the country until his death in 2000. Under his rule and the 'Collective Movement' the regime wanted to sustain the nationalist-socialist line of the state and the Ba'ath party. This created not a true socialist nation but a Syria that was highly centralised, with the military and elite bureaucrats playing a key role at all levels, including the economy. Hafez al-Assad strengthened his power using deeply sectarian methods of creating an elite state bureaucracy and an army composed of high-ranking officers from the minority Muslim Alawi sect. Till the 1980's Syria saw strong growth in the economy with evermore increased numbers of workers and dropping relative poverty. At the beginning of the 1980's the economic growth declined sharply. Having enjoyed a decade of growth and total control (and suppression) of any opposition, the regime started attacking the gains of the previous period. Wages were cut; subsidies on basic goods were removed. In the early 1990's unemployment rose sharply to 16%²⁵ and according to some figures more than 70% of the population were living below the relative poverty line. In early 90's the regime started a process of opening up the country to private business which marked the beginning of 'market economy'. What was a form of state capitalism under the rule of an elite military-bureaucrat class had begun to turn towards capitalism.

Between 1980 and 2000, the regime of Hafez al-Assad committed numerous massacres against civilians and organised opposition forces. In 1982, following attacks in the previous two years, the regime had murdered more than 20,000 civilians. 1980 saw the massacre of inmates in Tadmur Prison, which Amnesty

International described as “a source of despair, torture and degrading treatment”²⁶

From father Assad to son Assad - The nature of the Assad regime

Bashar al-Assad inherited his father’s power in 2000 and continued to open up the country to capitalist economy by advancing a neoliberal model while maintaining his harsh dictatorial rule. During the previous decades the economy was falsely described as ‘socialist’ when really it was a state capitalist dictatorship. He replaced this with a so-called ‘social market economy’ while in fact everything had begun to be market driven and hardly anything about it was social. Bashar al-Assad had begun to put the might of his power to the use of private capital and started creating an environment of crony capitalism by handing over state industries and assets to his family members, close allies and to powerful elites within the regime. Even Chatham House, a ‘prestigious’ pro-capitalist research and policy institute says, “*The uprising against the Assad regime was sparked by the security services’ brutal response to a demonstration of dissent by schoolchildren in Deraa. However, economic grievances were an important element fuelling the disaffection, both in Deraa – where the appropriation of land for Makhlof’s duty-free enterprise had been a contentious issue – and elsewhere in Syria*”.²⁷

Since the 2011 uprising in Syria, especially and most importantly within the international left and the global anti-war movement there have been deep divisions on the nature of the Assad regime. Some sections of the left and others have described his regime as, ‘anti-imperialist’ or ‘progressive’ or ‘pro-Palestinian’ or ‘pro-secularism’ etc. and dismissed the popular uprising against all ‘good things’ as a plot. The escalating war in the country, the emergence of counter-revolutionary Islamist forces and the intervention by global imperialists, especially the US, have given further excuse to Assad defenders to reject the social-political conditions which gave rise to the revolt in Syria. Furthermore, ‘defending the Assad regime’ has been put forward as an anti-imperialist duty for the left. According to Assad defenders, the only imperialist force in Syria is the US led bloc and all other forces, including the civilian protestors and counter-revolutionary forces alike are part of an imperialist attempt to topple the regime. Thus, they conclude that

the Russian and Iranian intervention in the war is a ‘legitimate’ and justified intervention in order to defend a ‘legitimate’ government.

In his article, titled *The Syrian Cause and Anti-Imperialism*²⁸ the Syrian revolutionary Yassin Al-Haj Saleh refers to a conversation: “*I was in Istanbul for about ten days when I met a Turkish communist who explained to me that what was going on in Syria was nothing but an imperialist conspiracy against a progressive, anti-imperialist regime*”. He then argues why we need to understand the political and social dimensions of the Syrian struggle and the nature of the Assad regime, to make sense of it all.

Secularism

The so called ‘secularism’ of Assad is in fact all about a deep ethnic and religious sectarian divide in the country. As Saleh explains, “*the Regime’s so-called secularism is almost completely an ideological façade that covers its essential sectarianism. Divide and rule is not only a colonial method, it has become the regime’s method for over two generations. By the way, the regime never used the word secularism in its discourse in the past. Bashar or Buthaina Shaban only used this word in interviews with western journalists. Like the War on Terror, this is only another cheap commodity to sell to Western powers and even those on the left looking for ways to avoid recognizing the fascist character of the Assad regime. Inside Syria, the regime rules through a process of sectarianization to entice Syrians to fear and mistrust each other based on their sect. The regime attempts to present itself as the only force capable of keeping these divisions, which it in fact foments, in check. This is a deliberate policy. Sectarianism is not a primordial characteristic of Syria, or any other nation for that matter. It was foisted upon the country in order to divide the population and maintain the regime.*”²⁹

Furthermore, the secularism in Syria is another form of class oppression where the regime using its military might dismissed any opposition by the poorer sections of the society as a backward-religious-terrorist attempt. Assad and his family have been portrayed as western style secularists while his Grand Mufti of Damascus has been blessing the killing of civilians in his prisons. Secularism is in fact nothing but protecting the class interests of the ‘westernised’ lifestyles of the upper

classes and the elites within the inner circles of the regime.

Anti-Imperialism of Assad

There are two major global imperialist forces in Syria: The US and Russia. The US maintains its anti-Assad position while Russia, with support from Iran is doing its best to keep the regime in power and secure its global interests. The intervention by the US does not make the Assad regime anti-imperialist. In fact, given the nature of the Russian state and its self-serving actions in Syria, the Assad regime is in alliance with an imperialist power, it's just not the US in this case.

Historically, the regime has presented itself as an enemy of Israel, a supporter of Palestinians and Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In fact, its history is full of contradictions and political manoeuvres that at all times served the interests of the regime and the ruling class in Syria. It used the Palestinian struggle against Israel as a bargaining chip and to create a position of strength in the region. The Palestinian issue also gave Syria a bargaining chip against the US. The Palestinian refugees in Syria have always been under suspicion and surveillance by the regime.

Hafez al-Assad supported the first US-led war in Iraq in 1991.

Saleh describes Assad regimes 'anti-imperialism' as *"the regime always played a double game. Inside the country, the regime blackmailed Syrians, claiming that we were all under threat from outsiders, the old colonial powers, Western imperialism, and the Israeli occupation. It nurtured a besieged castle mentality and paranoia in the population. This was always useful to incriminate dissidents as foreign agents and impose political and ideological uniformity on Syrians. At the same time the regime blackmailed the Western powers with its assertion that it was a bulwark against fundamentalism and terrorism in Syria and the region. It was always prepared to slander its own population in presence of western diplomats, journalists, and scholars. The Assadists knew well that this discourse was marketable to imperialist powers that were engaged in their so-called War on Terror; this same discourse had justified the murder of tens of thousands killed in the early 1980s and now hundreds of thousands in their ongoing counterrevolution. Beneath all this*

*rhetoric, the Assad dynasty's main aim is to stay in power forever and accumulate millions and billions of dollars that comes with ruling the country".*³⁰

The Syrian regime is neither socialist, nor progressive. It has turned from a form of bureaucratic and military controlled state-capitalism into a neoliberal state. The state is not secular where religion and state are fully divorced but one that uses religion, among others to create sectarian divisions. These divisions have historically helped strengthen the ruling class in Syria. The Assad regimes have had many U-turns and political manoeuvres to protect the interests of the Syrian ruling class and to position themselves accordingly. The regime is not a democracy but an authoritarian dictatorship. It has been successfully using 'anti-imperialism' to suppress all forms of opposition in the country. While it pretended to protect minorities, such as Christian groups, it has always been oppressive to other ethnic groups such as the Kurds.

When one looks at the presidential election results of the past 45 years one has to wonder: How can any regime achieve such 'great' results?

2014 Bashar al-Assad 88.7%,
2007 Bashar al-Assad 99.82%,
2000 Bashar al-Assad 99.7%,
1999 Hafez al-Assad 100%,
1991 Hafez al-Assad 99.99%
1985 Hafez al-Assad 100%,
1978 Hafez al-Assad 99.9%,
1971 Hafez al-Assad 99.2%

There is only one answer to that: by constant oppression using a brutal state apparatus with total lack of freedom.

The Syrian people rose up for change. They ended up becoming refugees and their revolution was defeated for now. But that doesn't change the facts about the regime and the reasons why people went out to protest in 2011.