

A perspective on Syria

The Steering Group

In 2011 Syrians engaged in some of the largest mass democratic protests in the country's recent history. In what was viewed across the Arab world as a continuation of the 'Arab Spring', initially catalysed by the Tunisian Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Syrians took part in protests calling for greater civil liberties and an end to the Assad regime.

Background – Syrian Ba'athism before the revolution

In hindsight, it is easy to see why the protests happened when they did and on the scale that they did. For decades previously the policy of the ruling Ba'ath Party in Syria had been to suppress independent organisations in Syrian civil society by incorporating them within the state and offering financial incentives to maintain compliance from trade union bureaucracies, as well as making welfare provision dependent upon membership of state-monitored organisations. In the early 2000s a series of shocks to the Syrian economy threatened the viability of this model, and austerity measures of the regime weakened the stranglehold over Syrian civil society. Nevertheless, the Assad regime maintained an enormous state surveillance apparatus and a grotesque network of prisons, where political prisoners were, and continue to be, tortured.

The Ba'athist policy in Syria pursued by the Assad Government - in which many key posts are held by members of the minority Alawite sect - was one of formal equality for ethnic minorities. Alawites in particular were a specifically persecuted group prior to the Assad regime, and much of the support for the regime from minority groups in the Syrian conflict can be attributed to fears of a loss of status if the regime falls. 'Equality' for minorities in Syria has always been shaky at best, however, and partial protection for certain minorities has gone hand in hand with vicious persecution of others. In particular, the Kurds in north-eastern Syria have historically suffered greatly under the Syrian government; as far back as 1962, 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their Syrian citizenship and rendered stateless, and from the 1970s onwards Kurdish language has been banned, Kurdish political parties outlawed, and Kurdish schools declared illegal. Where the regime has acted more benevolently towards Kurdish regional aspirations, for instance in its tacit support for the establishment of Kurdish militia units in the years prior to 2011, this has largely been related to geopolitical objectives such as Syrian hostility towards Turkey, in which the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party – affiliated with the the PKK, the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party) acted as a convenient bargaining chip. Regime policy has most consistently acted to broker power between minorities and play on sectarian divisions to maintain compliance, as in the establishment of an 'Arab Cordon' across northern Syria, where the regime attempted to displace Kurdish farmers in order to settle Bedouin Arabs and 'Arabise' large parts of Kurdish majority areas. As revolutionary socialists we should recognise these tactics for what they are, and place the blame, as far as is possible, with the regime which cynically employs divide-and-rule tactics, rather than with the minorities involved.

2011 – the Syrian Revolution begins

All of the above provides the context for the first few years of the Syrian Revolution. Protests in major cities in 2011 were met with unprecedented force, with snipers firing into crowds in Damascus and the army quickly deployed against peaceful protesters. Due to incredible regime repression the revolution militarised very quickly, meaning that the mass-participatory

Internal bulletin – rs21 National Meeting 9 June – 10 June 2018

and democratic aspects of the early demonstrations were fleeting; this is also a product of the fact that due to regime policy there were very few autonomous organisations capable of directing popular struggle or facilitating democratic participation. In response to the formation of Syrian Opposition forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) the regime moved troops out of Syrian Kurdistan, ceding effective control of Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) to the Kurdish Supreme Committee (amalgamated from the PYD and the Kurdish National Council, an affiliate of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government). Due to the relative autonomy which the Syrian revolution inadvertently granted Syrian Kurds, the PYD played little role in the first few years of the Syrian Civil War, and the main focus of the PYD and its military wing, the YPG (People's Protection Units) was in repelling Da'esh in Eastern Syria, a campaign which periodically involved co-operation with forces from the FSA, but which is also reported to have involved conflict with FSA forces.

The Assad regime played a strategic role in aggravating the conflict in Eastern Syria, tactically releasing imprisoned Ba'athist torturers and other prisoners ripe for recruitment by Da'esh to prolong the fighting. The conflict in Syria proper involved a large degree of urban fighting, with the regime heavily bombarding civilian areas with barrel bombs and chemical weapons. Despite this, for a while in the first few years of the war there was a distinct possibility of a rebel victory, although the FSA remained a shaky alliance of forces.

It is of course impossible to take full account of the situation in Syria without acknowledging the central role played by foreign intervention. One of the main factors which turned the tide in the regime's favour was the intervention of Russia in late 2015 and the use of Russian air-power to decimate the FSA and the civilian population in opposition-held territory. Western foreign policy largely focused on the 'War on Terror' agenda, providing military support in the form of weapons and air-cover to forces fighting Da'esh, including both the FSA and the PYD-YPG. Over time, Western, and particularly US, involvement coalesced in support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in late 2015. The SDF is reportedly made up of 60% Arab and 40% Kurdish units, and was formed largely after the successful defence of the Kurdish city of Kobane from Da'esh. The SDF has since been thoroughly amalgamated into US foreign policy, and largely comprises the 'boots on the ground' for Western policy in Syria. Similarly, the presence of Hezbollah in Southern Syria has provided the regime with ground support against the FSA. Western Governments have nominally backed the Syrian Opposition, although this has meant little in practice, and the FSA have repeatedly found themselves short on munitions and supplies.

The anti-imperialist response

In this context, though it may be understandable for activists in solidarity with the Syrian Opposition to call on Western Governments to make good on their 'support' in the form of military aid or a No Fly Zone, we are clear that opposing foreign intervention in all its forms is central to our role as anti-imperialists, since Western intervention will only ever happen in the interests of Western foreign policy, and the most effective role we can play is in arresting the predatory imperial interests of the state we reside in by whatever means at our disposal.

This being said, one of the main problems which has hampered analysis of the situation in Syria and any meaningful solidarity which that could facilitate is a vulgarised understanding of 'anti-imperialism' which operates on the assumption that 'imperialism' is entirely coterminous with US foreign policy. One of the great advantages of International Socialist perspectives has always been an appreciation of imperialism as a world system, allowing us to escape from reductive positions in inter-imperialist conflicts. This has to mean more, however, than thinking that the situation in Syria can be grasped by viewing it through the

Internal bulletin – rs21 National Meeting

9 June – 10 June 2018

lens of Western *and* Russian foreign policy, or even Western *and* Russian *and* Iranian foreign policy. Imperialism is a world system not just because it involves a variety of different state actors, but also because it is the inevitable pattern of capitalism as a global phenomenon, and imperialism is itself a form of capital accumulation which is not reducible to the collective and contradictory foreign policy objectives of different nation states. To properly understand the situation in Syria will require a more thoroughgoing analysis of imperialism in the 21st century than has yet been attempted. In the meantime, however, there are certain positions on which we can agree:

- We must have unconditional solidarity with the Syrian Revolution and the democratic uprising that was initiated in 2011. This does not exclude varying assessments of the speed and extent with which democratic spaces and practices have receded due to the swift militarisation of the conflict and the regime's brutal repression.
- We must vociferously refute conspiracy theories which imply that the Syrian Revolution was somehow planned or orchestrated by the US, as well as rejecting revisionist interpretations of the revolution which attempt to recast it through the Islamophobic lense of the 'War on Terror', with Assad as a 'lesser evil' in the fight against 'Islamism'.
- We must vocally oppose all external military interventions in Syria, and reaffirm our dedication to better understanding imperialism as a global system.

Kurdistan and the PYD-YPG

We must support the Kurdish struggle for liberation and national self-determination across the areas Kurds inhabit in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The military success of the PYD-YPG in recent years has had the positive effect of securing a degree of Kurdish national autonomy in Kurdish-majority regions of Syria (Rojava). It also seems clear that these areas have seen gains in terms of women's liberation and the tolerance of LGBT people. The YPG successfully defended the Kurdish population of Syria from the advance of Da'esh and is currently the strongest military bulwark against the Turkish state's imperialist expedition in Afrin, which aims at suppressing Kurdish liberation struggles across both states. Moreover, the PYD-YPG was rightly praised for its impressive liberation and support for the Yazidi people in the Sinjar mountains (a campaign which aggravated tensions with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, a deeply authoritarian and neoliberal entity discredited by a record of collaboration with Iraqi state repression).

That said, support for Kurdish liberation in the abstract becomes more complex in practice. Although the PYD-YPG is militarily hegemonic in its areas of influence, it is not the sole political representative of Syrian Kurds, and indeed has repeatedly been accused of violence and authoritarian practices against rival political organisations in areas under its control, including other Kurdish organisations. PYD-controlled areas now include swathes of Arab-majority territory, and there is little sign of meaningful power-sharing in these regions, or of any attempt at same. While Arab chauvinism towards the Kurdish struggle is undoubtedly a reality across the country, including in the FSA elements presently participating in the deplorable attack on Afrin, there is no defence of the YPG's decision to enter into objective military collusion with the Assad regime on key occasions, such as in the siege of Aleppo. This stance has made it at best a bystander, and at worst an intermittent accomplice, to the systematic slaughter of Syrians by the regime which has been the source of the vast majority of fatalities in the country since 2011.

Internal bulletin – rs21 National Meeting

9 June – 10 June 2018

Recent years have seen escalating military collaboration between the YPG and the military forces of both the US and Russia. YPG forces have fought alongside US special forces in Syria and have actively solicited and coordinated US and Russian air strikes, including during the battle of Raqqqa, where US air power destroyed 80-90% of the city and killed an estimated 2,000 of its inhabitants, overwhelmingly civilians. The PYD has consistently supported US aerial interventions and is presently agitating actively on a diplomatic level for a permanent American military presence in Syria.

We note that one of the main cultural orientations of the UK-based left towards the situation in Syria has been a lionisation of individual Westerners who travel to the region to join the YPG/J as fighters. We cannot endorse or excuse this activity, or the glorification of it. This is because:

- The record of the YPG, as detailed above, includes sustained and lethal cooperation with US and Russian military imperialism in Syria. This undermines the Kurdish-Arab unity needed to rid the region of the Assad dictatorship, Kurdish oppression and imperialist intervention.
- To hold a position of critical solidarity towards a group supposes a very different approach to that of literally joining said group as a member or fighting under its command. The PYD-YPG should not qualify for the unqualified support implied by the act of joining it as a fighter.
- To implicate oneself in military action abroad can bring dangers to one's comrades at home, including those are particularly vulnerable to state repression, such as those whose rights of residence may be unclear or who face risks to their employment. In the absence of a clear and agreed shared organisational commitment to that particular form of solidarity with the specific struggle in question, this cannot be appropriate or acceptable.

A final thought

We must also bear in mind that our political responsibilities as socialists in Britain require a particular sensitivity to the dynamics of racism and oppression in Britain. Whilst it is understandable that many Kurdish activists, who have experienced brutal repression at the hands of self-declared 'Islamist' states and governments, may have reservations about 'political Islam', we have to be aware that such reservations can be weaponised by right wing Islamophobes in Britain or co-opted into a vulgarised and racist 'War on Terror' understanding of the Syrian conflict. We have a duty as anti-racists not to facilitate implicitly Islamophobic arguments, and have to prioritise this, since Islamophobia represents a dominant strand in the structure of contemporary European racism. In this regard, although 'Arab chauvinism' towards Kurds explains some of the 'facts of the ground' determining conflicts in Syria and the Middle East, we should not consider it central to our analysis of racism in Britain.