# **The roots and grassroots of the Syrian revolution (Part 1 of 4)**

In a series commemorating the uprising's third anniversary, Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher answers key questions still circulating in the western digital commons. In this first part he offers us a short history of the socio-economic causes behind the protests that sprang up across Syria in March 2011.

[Joseph Daher](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/author/joseph-daher/)

1 April 2014

****Introduction****

For nearly three years now, the majority of observers have analyzed the Syrian revolutionary process in geopolitical and sectarian terms, from above, ignoring the popular political and socio-economic dynamics on the ground. The threat of western intervention has only reinforced this idea of an opposition between two camps: the western states and the Gulf monarchies on one side, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other.

*But we refuse to choose between these two camps, we refuse this logic of the “least harmful [evil]” which will only lead to the loss of the Syrian revolution and its objective: democracy, social justice and the rejection of sectarianism.*

Lately, mainstream medias, whether in the west or in the Middle East, and western and regional governments, have been wanting us to believe that the Syrian revolution is dead and has transformed itself into a sectarian war between the Sunni majority and the religious and ethnic minorities on the other side, or in a similar trend, in an opposition between jihadists vs the Assad regime. This last perspective has actually pushed many to join the camp composed of people who range from the conservative right wing to ill-informed anti-imperialists, who argue that Assad is a lesser evil to the Jihadists. In fact we should oppose both, because they nurture each other and are both seeking to establish an authoritarian system.

A similar comment could be made to a section of the left that has abandoned the Syrian revolution because it was allegedly hijacked, or those who have even not supported it since the beginning. For example, Tariq Ali has declared that he believes the popular movement has been,

“overtaken by the Muslim Brotherhood and groups to its Right, backed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Deserters from Assad were taken over by Turkey and France. So the character of the uprising changed by the end of the first twelve months. How can one not register this fact? The relationship of forces today does not favour any secular or progressive groups. To pretend otherwise is to be blinded by illusions or the requirements of intra-sectarian left politics.”

But there is no going back to the era of the Assad regime before the beginning of the revolution and to other forms of oppression. There is no alternative to the continuation of the revolution. One of the main slogans in Syria chanted by protesters is, “Rather death than humiliation”.

At the same time, we have to be clear that Islamist reactionary groups are a threat to the revolution. If they attack revolutionaries they must be condemned and challenged in whatever way it takes.

We need to oppose these counter-revolutionary forces, and build a third radical front struggling for the objectives of the revolution: democracy, social justice and no to sectarianism.

The role of the revolutionary is to be on the side and struggle with these popular organizations struggling for freedom and dignity and to radicalize as much as possible the popular movement towards progressive objectives, while fighting against opportunists and reactionary forces opposing popular class interests.

We would like to end also by repeating that no solution can be achieved if the democratic and social issues are not dealt with together. Social demands cannot be separated from democratic demands : nor can they be subordinated ; they go in hand in hand.

## ****The demise of independent politics in Syria****

As Pierre Frank, French Trotskyist, once wrote : “Let us note that the greatest theoreticians of Marxism did not at all define the political nature of a bourgeois regime by the positions which the latter held in the field of foreign policy but solely and simply by the position it occupied in relation to the classes composing the nation”.

The roots of the revolutionary process are the absence of democracy and increasing social injustice as a result of neoliberal policies, especially as implemented to a high degree with the arrival to power of Bashar Al Assad in 2010.

The advent of Hafez Al Assad to power had marked a new era in Syria whereby independent popular organizations from trade unions to professional associations and civic associations came under the regime’s authority after harsh repression.  Professional unions of doctors, lawyers, engineers and pharmacists were dissolved in 1980. They were the main organizations previously leading the struggle for the return of democratic freedoms and the lifting of the emergency rule. They were re-established but their leaders were replaced by state appointees.

In the school system, the regime targeted principally leftist teachers from different tendencies in the 1970s onwards, simultaneously allowing religious fundamentalist currents to develop. Independent intellectuals, such as Michel Kilo and Wadi Iskandar, and university teachers, including Rif’at Sioufi and Asef Shahine, critical of the régime, were also the targets of the regime.

No immunity was granted to university campuses, neither to teachers nor students. Security agencies could actually arrest students inside lecture halls and/or on campus and they did.

In a similar manner the regime imposed its domination on the bureaucracy of the trade union workers, and this is what hindered the labour struggle against neo-liberal policies pursued by the authoritarian regime since 2000, which has allowed the decline in the standard of living of the majority of the people, as well as political répression.

These were the main causes which launched the wave of protests, causes that in these years revolved around the economy. For example, in May, 2006, hundreds of workers protested outside the public construction company in Damascus and clashed with security forces, and at the same time that taxi drivers were going on strike in Aleppo.

More recently, the trade unions as an institution have been completely silent in the face of the repression of the Syrian people, and more specifically against the workers, even when the latter were the target of repression.  Successful campaigns for general strikes and civil disobedience in Syria during December 2011 nevertheless paralysed large parts of the country, indicating a level of activism on the part of the working class and the exploited, who are indeed the heart of the Syrian revolution.

Repression also included all political parties that refused to submit to the diktat of Hafez Al Assad and the obligation to enter the umbrella of the National Progressive Front, where they had no right to any political activity except under the approval of the régime. These parties suffered from harsh repression ever since his advent to power, and not only at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the beginning of the seventies, various secular political parties, especially any with leftist tendencies were the targets of the regime, including the movement of February 23 (the radical tendency of the Baath close to Salah Jadid), the League of Communist Action (Rabita al amal al shuyu’i) whose members came mostly from the Alawi sect, and to a lesser extent the Communist Party Political Bureau (CPPB) of Ryad Turk. The National Assembly, so-called for including various leftist parties, was also severely repressed at the beginning of the 80s.

This trend has continued into the 2000s with the coming to pwoer of Bashar Al Assad. An opposition movement gathering of intellectuals, artists, writers, scholars and even politicians who demanded reforms and democratization of the state between 2000 to 2006 was brutally repressed by the various wings of the security apparatus. This was accompanied also by the opening up of debate forums, and, between 2004 and 2006, by a multiplicity of sit-ins, a new political phenomenon in Syria. Calls for sit-ins came from political parties and civil organizations at one and the same time. The government of Bashar Al Assad cracked down on this movement, forums were actually closed, sit-ins were severely repressed and many intellectuals who launched this call for civil society and democratization were imprisoned. At the same time, the Kurdish Intifada of 2004 was severely crushed.

Syrian society came increasingly under the control of the regime in all its various components.  The Baath Party was the only political organization which had the right to organize events, lectures and public demonstrations on the campus of a university or military barracks, or the right to publish and distribute a newspaper. Even the political parties allied to the regime in the National Progressive Front, did not have the right to organize, to issue statements or to have the slightest official presence. The Baath also controlled an array of corporatist associations through which various societal sectors were brought under regime tutelage. They were called popular organizations and set their sights on incorporating peasants, youth and women.

## ****The fight for social justice****

Social justice has also been a key demand from Syria’s popular masses. It is not a surprise that the biggest section of the Syrian revolutionary movement includes the economically disenfranchised rural and urban working and middle classes who are experiencing the accelerated imposition of neoliberal policies by Bashar Al Assad since his arrival to power.

These policies especially benefited a small oligarchy and a few of its clients. Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, embodied this mafia-style process of privatization led by the regime.

A process of privatization created new monopolies in the hands of the relatives of Bashar al-Assad, while the quality of goods and services declined. These neoliberal economic reforms allowed the appropriation of economic power for the benefit of the rich and powerful. The process of privatization of public companies has been made for the benefit of a few individuals close to the regime. At the same time the financial sector has developed inside the establishment of private banks, insurance firms, the Damascus stock exchange and money exchange bureaus.

Neoliberal policies undertaken by the regime have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, especially from the Arab Gulf, by liberalizing the Syrian economy for their benefit and at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians hit by inflation and the rising cost of living.

In addition to that, Syria’s agricultural and public sector were also declining and no effective strategy to strengthen them have been suggested yet, which could jeopardize the country’s alimentary autonomy and harm the population through the constant rise in prices of food and non-food basic needs.

The process of economic liberalization has created greater inequality in Syria. The poorest were struggling to help themselves in the new economy due to a lack of employment opportunities, while the middle class is plummeting towards the poverty line because their incomes have not kept up with inflation, which rose to 17% in 2008.

There is now 20-25% unemployment, reaching 55% for under-25s (in a country where 65% of the total population are under 30). The percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from eleven percent in 2000 to thirty-three percent in 2010. That is, around seven million Syrians living around or below the poverty line.

In agriculture, the dispossession of several hundred thousand farmers in the northeast as a result of the drought should not be thought of as merely a natural disaster. The increasingly intensive use of land by agro-businessmen — including land previously kept for grazing — as well as the illegal drilling of water wells facilitated by paying off local administrators has contributed to the crisis in agriculture.

Indeed, the expansion and intensification of land exploitation by large commercial farmers (agrobusiness), including land previously held for grazing, as well as the illegal drilling of wells and the establishment of selective water pipes meeting the requirements of the new landowners – all facilitated by the corruption of the local governments – have accelerated the agricultural crisis. According to the United Nations, in 2010, more than a million people have been forced to migrate from the north-eastern region of Syria to urban centres.

The geography of the uprisings in Idlib and Deraa as well as other rural areas including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, historic bastions of the Baath Party that had not taken part on a massive scale in the insurrection of the 1980s, shows the involvement of the victims of neoliberalism in this revolution. Many from these groups joined the armed groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

****Catch** [Part 2](http://www.opendemocracy.net/joseph-daher/roots-and-grassroots-of-syrian-revolution-part-2-of-4)**: 'Syrian regime's rhetoric: socialist, secular, anti-imperialist?' tomorrow, 2/4/2014****