

Interview with Ziad Majed¹ on the Syrian Revolution²

Two years on, Syria's revolution remains trapped in geostrategic considerations and military deadlock

1. Two years on, and despite rivers of blood, Syrians are yet to traverse the distance that lies between them and between the fall of the regime and freedom. To what do you attribute this?

There are a number of factors that have delayed the revolution's ultimate victory. The first of these is military-security: over the course of four decades the regime has managed to construct a vast, brutal and well-armed machine of repression, whose streamlined efficiency can be attributed to sectarian and tribal/dynastic allegiances. It defends this regime with the utmost violence and callousness. There are also many who profit from their relationship with this machine and fear its fall, placing them in the position of an existential struggle with the revolution. On the other side, the revolution itself has not yet reached a high level of military effectiveness, due to deficiencies in logistics and supply and a dearth of combat experience and coordination. Not that this should come as any surprise: the majority of fighters in the Free Army and various armed brigades are newcomers to combat operations and their legendary courage and unshakeable faith in the cause for which they fight are not in themselves enough to tip the balance in their favour, without access to the modern weaponry and ammunition that would guarantee them superior firepower during clashes, and without their efforts being better coordinated.

The second factor is linked to the first, in which regard it is decisive: Russian-Iranian support for the regime. Moscow provides political cover and dispatches thousands of tons of war materiel on a regular basis, as well as providing military advice. Tehran meanwhile offers material support (more than 11 billion dollars up to the end of last year according to figures from the UK), trains thousands of young men who form sectarian militias, sends experts in digital espionage and other highly trained cadres, while from July last year it has been ferrying over Shia fighters from Iraq and others from Lebanon's Hezbollah to fight in key areas in and around Damascus as well as in the al-Qusayr-Homs region. The rising numbers of these foreign fighters are reflected in the increased number of public funerals of those killed among their ranks.

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The third factor is social-sectarian in nature. The vertical divisions within Syrian society and the regime's success in fomenting sectarian bigotry within the Alawite community—including those who do not directly benefit from the regime or its networks of corruption—have so far guaranteed it popular support, a source of manpower and a geographical base in which it can securely receive foreign aid.

The fourth factor is related to ongoing international hesitancy towards the situation in Syria and the failure of the United States so far to take a firm line against the regime by refusing to countenance its remaining in power in any form whatsoever, a position which could then be translated into diplomatic and legal measures (if not overtly military ones) such as rescinding Syria's seat at the United Nations, studying ways to bring the regime's crimes to the international courts or placing Bashar, plus all his family members and those complicit with him in the killing, onto the terrorism list. This hesitancy emboldens Russia and Iran to continue providing support to the regime and believing in the possibility of saving it.

2. Why are Moscow and Tehran so determined to support the regime?

Both Russia and Iran have their own calculus with regard to Syria.

For the Russians there are four principle considerations. The first is their seeing the Syria of today as a gateway through which they might return to the international stage as a power that cannot be circumvented or sidelined. Since the end of the Cold War they believe that Moscow has been repeatedly marginalized during times of conflict, some of which have involved its allies (e.g. Serbia), has seen wars started against its better interests (e.g. Iraq), or witnessed coups against friendly regimes (e.g. Libya). Syria, in their eyes, can make up for these setbacks (the crown-jewel in its pushback against the "allies of the West" on its borders: politically in the case of Ukraine and militarily with Georgia). From here on Moscow wants to impose its presence as an active player in the balance of power, particularly in the Middle East.

The second consideration is strategic. The Al-Assad regime is Moscow's ally in the Middle East. The only Russian military base in the entire Mediterranean region is located in Tartus.

The third point we might describe as "sectarian", and is linked to the pro-Syrian regime stance of the Russian Orthodox Church (itself synonymous with that of the Kremlin), which regards Al-Assad's government as "the protector of one of the largest Christian minorities in the East" as individuals close to the church have described it. These Russian Christians are prompted by their concern over a "Sunni resurgence" in the region, which could extend to certain central Asian states on the Russian borders as well as the Caucasus and Russian Federation member states with Muslim majorities, threatening Moscow's monopoly of control and bilateral relations.

The fourth and final consideration is purely interest-based and is linked to the Russian economy and its arms companies, which in less than a decade have lost the Iraqi and Libyan markets and are currently seeing part of the Yemeni market slip from their grasp. Only Algeria and Syria are left and they are keen to hang on to them and expand their operations within them as far as possible.

Iran's approach is very different. First of all there is the old alliance contracted between Tehran and Damascus in 1980. Tehran was looking for an Arab ally to prevent Saddam Hussein exploiting the Arab-Persian divide during his war with the Iranians, as well as a land bridge to export its revolution into Lebanese Shia circles. For his part, Hafez Al-Assad wanted to see his old foe Saddam Hussein sap his strength in a war against Iran while simultaneously raising his "price" for Western and Gulf powers (especially the Saudis), by showing that he could function as an intermediary with the Iranians in times of crisis, blackmailing them into cooperating with him if they did not want to see him side fully with Tehran.

Secondly, Iran's role in the region has steadily expanded over the last ten years following the fall of the Taliban and Saddam. Iran has become a player in Afghanistan, one with whom the Americans are forced to parley and the most influential actor in Iraq. There is their strategic depth, which enables Iranians to reach the Mediterranean and which has turned Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (the last courtesy of Hizbollah) into a "crescent" that has the potential to become an economic, military and demographic power operating in Tehran's interests, and places them directly on the Israelis' doorstep, granting them a threat deterrent against Israel or the ability to scare them out of attacking its nuclear program. Furthermore, this "crescent" separates Turkey from the Arab Gulf nations, placing the latter under pressure and curbing Ankara's ambitions for the region. For all these reasons, Iran's defense of Assad's regime is tantamount to a defense of its own control over Lebanon and Iraq and by extension, its continued ability to impose its influence.

Thirdly, there is the ideological-sectarian issue. The leadership in Tehran enjoys influence over the Shia (and Alawites) in the four above-mentioned countries and some of them are motivated to confront a long-feared Sunni assault on their "crescent", backed by Ankara, Riyadh and Doha.

3. How do you explain the American hesitancy you mentioned before? Is there any difference between the US position and that of European nations?

The American position is also complex, shaped by a number of internal and external factors. I shall begin with the internal, or domestic American, factor, which has been neglected by many commentators. The base that elected Obama is chiefly made up of Americans of colour (i.e. Latinos and Afro-American, who taken together constitute around 30 per cent of the current US population) and young Americans (urban students in particular, the majority of them white). He also received the majority of votes from women and citizens with a university education. Since the Iraq War, the overwhelming majority of all these demographics has been opposed to American intervention outside its borders, military intervention in particular, regarding such actions as a huge waste of financial resources and human life, not to mention one of the causes of the dislike felt towards Washington around the globe. They demand that priority be given to economic and domestic social issues. Since 2008, Obama had promised to respect these wishes in his election campaigns—indeed, he has been calling for these very things himself—and

up until 2010 successive financial and economic crises ensured he kept his word. In the last two years, because he decided to stand for a second term, he has been focused on issues that mobilize the American electorate.

Moving to factors concerned with the hesitancy of American foreign policy, it seems that previously, Washington did not place Syria at the top of its list of priorities. For some years, that “honour” has gone to the Iranian nuclear program, followed by the moribund Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. About a year ago, Egypt came to the fore, specifically mediating between the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood in order to preserve the stability of an ally state (and the largest Arab “friendly” nation) and out of fear of a breakdown of a major state on the Israeli/Gaza borders and a potential end to the Camp David Agreement. Then you have Israel’s interests. At the start of the Syrian revolution, Israel made no attempt to hide its preference for an intimidated and exhausted Al-Assad remaining in power, before the positions of some of its officials changed a few months ago into claims that they did not mind if Al-Assad stepped down so long his chemical and missile weapons systems were secured, along with the Golan border. Yet this change of tone has not yet produced any significant change in approaches to the Syrian situation.

One could say that as far as Washington is concerned, Syria has become a huge drain on Iran and thus there is no need to resolve things or push for any solutions so long as the conditions for any final decision on removing Al-Assad and the forms it might take remain subject to dispute and unclear.

If correct, these factors taken together explain America’s extreme tardiness in dealing with Syria.

Europe’s positions differ from America’s, but neither is theirs a united approach. France and Britain support arming the revolution in order to hasten the regime’s fall, even as others, such as Germany and Sweden, used to oppose this move (or at least question its consequences) . The EU is trying to fashion a tricky consensus out of its members’ conflicting positions, thus paralyzing its diplomatic efforts and delaying any decisive executive action. Europe’s inability to reach agreement and become a force that might fill at least part of the vacuum created by America’s disengagement, further explains Washington’s sense that its temporary absence for reasons of internal politics will not ultimately affect its status as a world leader. Russia’s agitating for top spot seems destined to fizzle out, since Moscow has no real influence outside its immediate geographical ambit, its economy is more or less exhausted and its expansive capabilities are weak (and limited to its gas reserves). At the same time, the owner of the largest developing economy, China, does not possess the capability for political leadership and as yet has not made the attempt. This American confidence has affected its “lack of urgency” on a number of fronts, first and foremost, Syria.

Still, I believe that changes in European positions are in the offing. The EU embargo on weapons shipments to Syria is due to expire in May, and I do not believe that either Paris or London will agree to renew it without conditions that provide a distinction between the embargo as a legitimate mechanism to reduce levels of violence and

between the consequences of Syrian regime allies failing to abide by it, which would necessarily strengthen the regime's position.

4. Following on from the previous question, how can we interpret Arab and Turkish positions and what of Lebanon in particular?

It is difficult to interpret the Turkish position without taking into account the absence of any consensus on Syria among Turkey's political parties. The secular Kemalist parties, along with certain Leftist groupings, are in the main negatively disposed towards the Syrian revolution. They regard it as Islamic, and it is enough that Erdogan and his party support it for them to take the other side. The same applies to some in the military. It is impossible to totally discount sectarianism, since a large proportion of the secularist and Leftist support base comes from Alevi (Turkish Alawite) areas. Similarly, a number of businessmen and investors who have done well from trade and tourism in recent years have been hurt by the revolution and have been unable to make up their losses by relocating (legally or illegally) their factories and warehouses from Northern Syria into Turkey. This internal split has left the Turkish government uncertain which way to turn, compounding its confusion as a NATO member whose hands are tied by NATO policies and further complicating its ongoing efforts to preserve economic and political ties with Moscow, Beijing and Tehran under what remains of the "Zero Problems" policy. Of course, Ankara's fundamental concern is with the Kurdish issue and its fear that escalating events in Syria could lead in effect to independence or large autonomy for Syrian Kurds, emboldening their Turkish cousins to mobilize, and certainly the Syrian regime has exploited its ties with the PKK for just this purpose. Turkey's latest agreement with Ocalan may reduce tensions over the Kurdish issue, which in any case will never be resolved without Kurds being granted cultural, linguistic, political and social rights whether in Turkey, Syria or Iran (though considerable progress has been made in Iraq).

Despite this, it is impossible to overstate the amount of support Turkey has provided, and continues to provide, to the Syrian revolution. It welcomed the first army deserters, transformed Istanbul into a center for opposition figures and their organizations and provided military support and training to some revolutionary brigades. Naturally, none of this would have happened had Ankara not been looking to extend its influence; it is all part of the great game of regional and international relations played in any country which is rendered politically vulnerable and exposed to war or some other profound crisis.

Arab positions on Syria vary from country to country. Generally speaking, however, if we leave out Algeria and Iraq—two countries that support the regime (economically and with petroleum, and maybe more)—we find that the majority of the other nations either support the revolution or maintain an officially neutral stance.

The Gulf nations (Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular) are very clear about the need to bring down the regime and are the primary source of funding for the revolution's armed wing and certain political bodies. This of course raises a problem, since neither Qatar

nor Saudi Arabia have any credibility as democracies, yet at the same time a revolution which is facing a brutal killing machine backed by a variety of foreign sources (most notably Russia and Iran) cannot afford to be choosy about the type of political regimes that support it (and which are located in non-hostile countries), particularly when support is so hard to come by. Its job is to utilize this support as part of its own national strategy, ensuring that it furthers its objectives first, and second, making sure it preserves its own ability to make independent decisions. It is instructive to note that all revolutions and liberation movements throughout the world receive foreign support from sources that are far from ideal, and that success is measured by the performance of the revolution or movement and its ability to preserve a relatively high degree of independence over its own decision-making. The moral probity of its funders is in that sense less important.

Then there are those Arab states where revolutions have swept away incumbent regimes, like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and to an extent, Yemen. These support the revolution, albeit half-heartedly (Egypt and Yemen) or confusedly (Tunisia). Libyan aid is particularly effective in the fields of arms supplies and logistics.

Next come the countries that are frankly terrified by the whole affair: Jordan, Morocco and Sudan. These states all have different set-ups and circumstances and their positions range from silence to neutrality—or in Jordan's case, indirect support for the revolution under duress (Jordan has agreed to allow the passage of arms and communication equipment into Syria).

Finally there is Lebanon. It has perhaps the most ambiguous position on events in Syria. A small, neighboring state, it was under Syrian control for many years and is yet to recover from the crimes and atrocities that the regime committed there. Furthermore, given the fragility of Lebanon's national consensus when faced by issues in its immediate neighborhood, which on the whole take the form of sectarian divisions followed by civil conflict (i.e. the response towards Nasiriyah and the Baghdad Pact in 1958, to the Palestinian issue in 1969 and, since 2004, towards ongoing friction between Iran and Saudi Arabia), there is currently huge tension between supporters of Al-Assad regime and pro-revolution elements, which in recent months has taken on worryingly sectarian dimensions, with Hizbollah openly taking part in the fighting on the side of the regime's forces and holding funerals for its fighters killed in Syria. Engaging in combat in this way, in addition to being a crime against the Syrian people and damaging to relations between Syrians and Lebanese, has also stirred animosities within Lebanon, animosities that might find violent expression in the future if they are not checked and consideration given to their disastrous consequences.

All that remains is the matter of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, an issue set to escalate in the foreseeable future as events on the ground in Damascus develop. Lebanon has the closest borders to the Syrian capital and the potential for a large-scale exodus should be taken into account, an idea of how to deal with it should be drawn up with the international community and Arab League playing a part. After all, it is far from certain that Lebanon's infrastructure, its electricity and its water supplies, are up to the challenge. It might cause the loathsome racism that already exists to rise. It might also promote a rise in pro-solidarity activism, but it would not be enough.

5. In one of your articles you outline the similarities between the Gaddafi and Al-Assad regimes. Why is it that the former fell while the latter remains standing? Shouldn't the similarities between these two dictatorships have led to the same result?

It's possible to pinpoint a number of similarities between the Libyan and Syrian regimes: corruption, dynastic rule, the entrenching of tribal/sectarian loyalties, attempts to represent political control in the person of an eternal leader and his offspring and to promote a culture of leader worship, and the proliferation of intelligence services and their crimes (though the Syrian services are much larger and more brutal than their Libyan counterparts ever were). But the two societies are very different, and so are their respective histories: the only point of comparison is their response to regime violence during their revolutions.

I don't believe it is a coincidence that the Libyan and Syrian revolutions were the only two to adopt the flags of independence which were subsequently removed by the Baath Party in Syria's case (in 1963, though it had been jettisoned before during the union with Nasser's Egypt between 1958 and 1961) and in Libya's case when Gaddafi took power in 1969. It seemed to be an attempt by the revolutionaries to reclaim a period that had been stolen; to return to the moment at which the theft took place and resume from there. And of course, in Libya then in Syria, the regimes' crimes forced the revolutionaries to militarize their movement.

When it comes to consequences and the international intervention in Libya that removed Gaddafi from power, then the two are very different. It is possible to list the factors that enabled a UN-sanctioned NATO intervention. First of all we have timing. The sudden flaring of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, their relatively uncomplicated progress (prior to the Islamist resurgence) and "guilt" over what appeared a very European mode of dealing with them, helped spur Paris and London into action. Secondly there is Libya's relatively uncomplicated (compared to Syria) geostrategic location between Egypt and Tunisia. Third, we have Libya's oil riches and the decades-old desire of France, the UK and the US to rebuild the crippled country (under Gaddafi it was more or less isolated) and get oil concessions and construction contracts. Fourthly, Libya is close to Western Europe and warplanes could be dispatched on combat missions over the country with little difficulty. Nor should we forget the Arab League's role in securing cover for international intervention, which was rendered possible by a climate of political insecurity and watchfulness and the obstacles to expressing solidarity with Gaddafi given his ranting speeches and the excessive violence he used against demonstrators. Syria was yet to become the open-ended carnage it is now. So, because the 'Arab Spring' was just beginning and because the Libyan revolution benefitted from the factors listed above, intervention was both possible and swiftly accomplished.

It is true to say that, in addition to all the complications attendant on the situation in Syria and the positions of the major powers, and in addition to poor timing—time was against the Syrian revolution, which only took off after the first thrill of the Arab Spring began to fade—what allowed a UN-sanctioned intervention to take place in Libya in those precise circumstances, is exactly what renders the probability of another

intervention in Syria so slim (especially since the Libyan venture only took place once agreement was reached with Russia and China that no actively invasive intervention would take place, only for the promise to be broken.)

6. The military rebellion in Syria appears to be Islamic in nature. Why has that particular identity achieved something like a monopoly over armed resistance in our region since the late 1980s?

All the armed groups that have been founded in the Arab world from the early 1980s have had Islamic reference.

From Lebanon and Palestine, and on through Egypt, Algeria and Iraq, not a single armed organization has been founded (as part of a rebellion against the authorities, or civil conflict, or war with Israel and the Americans), and not a single political grouping has been militarized, without it taking on the identity or slogans of Islamism. As for those Leftist parties or nationalist movements with armed wings, they had begun to withdraw from armed activity from the mid 1980s onwards, and stopped entirely in the 1990s with the drying up of foreign (Soviet) aid, the loss of public backing and their exposure to state-sponsored repression and marginalization. The only exception to this rule is the Fatah movement, plus a few other Palestinian organizations (and, of course, the PKK).

Given this, it comes as no surprise that the Islamist component in the Syrian revolution has become the most prominent ever since its enforced adoption of armed conflict, initially as a means of self-defense, then later in a war of liberation. This is exacerbated by the fact that “international” aid for armed groups made up of regime army deserters or non-ideological activists is almost non-existent, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia³ and Turkey (in addition of some Islamic networks in Kuwait)—the number one backers of the armed effort in Syria—have so far adopted brigades with an Islamic identity, arming them and circulating reports of their exploits (thus garnering them extra attention and paving the way for their expansion). To this we must add the extreme violence and its attendant terrors, the rituals of death and the rites that accompany each and every funeral, all amplified by the conservative socio-cultural environment in the rural and marginal urban areas where the fighting was fiercest before it moved into the cities. All of these things enabled the Islamic brigades to expand their presence and to some extent become the armed wing of the revolution, their forces more closely knit, well equipped and ready for death and combat.

Yet none of the above alters the fact that a powerful popular revolution against a brutal regime that is responsible for its demonstrations and protests turning into military operations; it alone is responsible for the rise of extremist groups and for the threat they pose to society. The more people band together to face this extremism and the quicker they are to bring it down, then the sooner a halt can be brought to the inflation and entanglement of Syria’s problems and people’s uncertainty in how to deal with them, and the sooner the spread of extremism and zealotry can be checked and with it the appeal to international Jihadist fighters. And the opposite is true.

³ The Saudis have lately changed this approach and decided to mainly support non-islamist groups.

7. There are those who want to do away with the word ‘revolution’ to describe what is happening in Syria and replace it with ‘civil war’. What would the consequences be if this new terminology takes hold?

There are those who use the term ‘civil war’ without any sinister intent or desire to harm the revolution. They see Syrians fighting one another and view it as a civil conflict or war between revolutionary or rebel groups and the regime’s army, whose soldiers are also Syrians. But there are others who use the term maliciously, mostly in a way that is biased towards the regime or in outright support of it. They seek to deny the revolutionary nature of events, and introduce a false equivalence between both sides in the conflict.

Defending the term ‘revolution’ is vital for a number of reasons, not just because it is correct, accurate and moral, but also for its legal and political implications. The term ‘civil war’ means that the members and bodies of the international community must treat it as an armed conflict between two sides of comparable strength and capabilities both fighting for power, influence, territory, wealth or resources, and that mediation between them is the only way to end the conflict in a manner acceptable to all. In such circumstances the regime’s legitimacy and demands would be granted equal status to those of its opponents, as though it were not a forty-three year-old dictatorship which bears full responsibility for everything that is taking place, and as though the popular revolution, a movement for national liberation and the restoration of rights and human dignity, did not enjoy moral and legal supremacy.

The fact that what is happening in Syria is a revolution does not mean that there are no vertical divisions in Syrian society, nor that support for the revolution is not concentrated in areas with a specific demographic majority nor indeed does it mean that the maligned regime loyalists are not genuinely fighting in defense of that regime. It does not mean that crimes have not been committed by those on the side of the revolution, nor by those who take advantage of the circumstances that prevail as a consequence of this revolution.

The term ‘revolution’ must continue to be used. It is no exaggeration to state that Syria’s revolution is one of the most important revolutions of all, certainly the most hard-pressed, and is confronting one of the most unforgiving, brutal and violent regimes of modern times.

8. Since the revolution began, many Leftists have chosen to remain silent, while others have sided with the Al-Assad regime. How do you explain this? Is it to do with their obsession with the idea of ‘resistance’?

Something we often forget when we talk about the Left in the Arab world, is that freedom and democracy have never been a priority in any of their intellectual or political programs. Similarly, the authoritarian practices of the “Socialist camp”—towards which the Left in the majority of its manifestations has been oriented—have been opposed to freedoms and democracy on the grounds that they are liberal concepts of the Western bourgeoisie. Indeed, the majority of Arab dictatorial regimes

have copied their party structures, intelligence services and political prisons from “socialist models” (from Stalin to Ceausescu). Leftists have long defended these models with the claim that they are attempts at realizing social justice and self-reliance, arguing that no state which has used them has been indebted to outside help, and that populations governed thus are educated and have access to food and healthcare, and so on.

These claims can still be heard today in certain Leftist circles which defend Al-Assad’s regime. Never, of course, without mention of ‘America and Israel’. Anybody who insults these two pariahs (whether they truly mean it or not) is thought to be an advocate of ‘resistance’, on the basis that all ills that befall our societies are linked to the plots and machinations of these two states.

Thus, it is not too hard for most nationalist, Leftist and “Leftized” groupings to take refuge in the Palestinian issue whenever they are confronted by failure, intractable difficulties or demands for freedom and reform. It is similarly easy for them to denounce “the West” as “conspiring” against them, should they face criticism from that quarter, and be assured of winning popular support for their denunciation. Some Western states have a long history of colonialist occupation. This and their support for Israel have been the cause of tragedies it is impossible to ignore, while “liberal” Arab regimes or the feudal states allied with them have not the slightest connection to democracy or human rights (albeit they have not committed mass slaughter against their populations to the same extent as “progressive” or socialist Arab states, like the Baath in Iraq and Syria, Gaddafi’s popular committees or Algeria’s FLN). And of course, those who cheer denunciations of the West forget, or choose to forget, that the very term itself is unsound: that “the West” also includes Marx and Freud and modern science, that it is social justice and women’s rights, that its politics are not monolithic whole and that much of what people aspire to or are proud of is in fact “Western” in origin... but that is another conversation altogether.

But if we connect all of the above with a position on the Syrian revolution we find—unsurprisingly—the same traditional discourse being used in support of the regime. There is endless talk of conspiracies, endless abuse of the West and its double standards; Sykes-Picot is cited and Palestine plays like a worn-out record. Denunciation of the Gulf’s “oil regimes” and their media is an art in itself while bewailing the lost stability and social contentment under the two Al-Assad’s is a constant refrain. The only new addition to this well-attested compilation of complaints is the abuse directed at the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism, which are viewed as “partners” in the revolution. As for the eighty thousand dead, the millions of those injured and detained, homeless and fleeing, as for the knives and warplanes, the bombs and Scuds, the billions spent on destroying any district whose residents rise up against a regime that has crushed the breath from their chests for nigh on half a century... Well, these are either details, of no interest to these Leftists, or otherwise the price that must be paid for defeating the conspiracies that they contend with night and day.

Thus we have a moral bankruptcy to go with the political, and one that is equally present among fools and hypocrites.

However, to those causes listed above I might add another, particular to those Lebanese Leftists who support Al-Assad regime (and which may apply to their Syrian comrades). The cause I am thinking of is, frankly stated, sectarianism, and at its most basic level involves animosity towards Sunnis who are seen as a “majority threat”. This bigotry is disguised by an exaggerated secularism and a purported fear of Salafism and “medievalism”. I do not think it a coincidence that the majority of those Leftists who support Al-Assad regime, belong to certain sects, nor that, offering unqualified support to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hizbollah, they nevertheless only perceive “medievalism” in Sunni Islamic (and occasionally non-Islamic) groups.

Moving on to the positions adopted by certain elements of the “Western” Left, there are four things that can explain their support for the Syrian regime: a) Anti-imperialism and the belief that any Third-world regime that comes in for criticism is deserving of support, a stance that might be described as conspiratorial Pavlovian conditioning; b) The obsession with geostrategic thinking, which happily disposes of whole populations, millions of human beings and their dignity and rights, and looks no further than borders, wealth, and interests—literature of this kind is also conspiratorial in nature and not entirely innocent of racism, since ignoring people and their rights entails despising them, or at best, failing to respect their freedoms and their entitlement to these freedoms; c) Culturalism for which the violence in our region holds no terrors, since it views such violence as one of the mechanisms by which conflicts express themselves in and of itself not automatically to be decried or criminalized—this, too, has racist tendencies, since they see no problem in our ruler being a criminal so long as he fulfills their anti-imperialist fantasies, while they are the first to start shouting if their ruler were to mistreat a citizen or be discovered to possess an undisclosed bank account; d) Islamophobia, which locates them alongside the vocally racist far-right, brandishing their secularism in the face of people they consider to be “Islamists” and—as their odious and shameless refrain goes—preferring a secular dictatorship over a religious one.

I would like to finish up by pointing out that conspiracy theories are infinitely more appealing than plain narratives about revolutions and uprisings for freedom or against the injustice of tyrants. Embracing these theories and denouncing dark machinations has a thrill of its own: the appeal of claiming you know “how things really are”, that you’ve glimpsed the malevolent intent at the heart of international relations. It delights researchers to lay claim to such illusory distinctions, to flaunt the appearance of special, secret knowledge.

9. We will wrap up with a question about Syrian cyberspace, since the start of the revolution. Why did you state in one of your articles that Syria's Facebook was unlike any other?

To respond to your question I will use some paragraphs from the article you mention, and which I wrote a few months ago, when the internet was shut down in Syria for three whole days. During those three days, Syrians and their friends and contacts came to see the extent to which Facebook, Skype and other social networks had become an intimate and vital part of their daily routine. Cutting these networks off meant cutting them off from one another and from the world at large: self imprisoned, as though some vast jail had barred its doors and shut them all in Syria, or as though some great act of rejection had pushed them further from all those who lived abroad, had orphaned them, had left them for a short while in fear of death.

The shutting down of the Syrian internet, then its coming back online (accompanied by much rejoicing and what might have seemed, on the day itself, celebrations worthy of liberation itself) led us to two conclusions:

“The first is general, that man’s relationship with cyberspace has become intensely complex, transcending utilitarian applications, access to information and news-based or casual communication, and taking on the form of an emotional investment without which it becomes difficult to deal with the obstacles and frustrations of real life. Facebook may be the network that has pushed and entrenched investment the most, and added the touches that make it addictive to users. ‘Like’ and ‘Share’, Public and Private, One-on-one chats and conference chats and groups followed by proliferating links and tags: cyberspace is transformed into a space for experimentation, for empowering direct expression and generating new abstract forms for this expression which face-to-face encounters cannot necessarily provide. Uploading an image, song or phrase describing the user’s mood offers a swift summary of things that “real” conversation often finds impossible to express or to allow others to participate in. For instance, no one starts singing out loud in a café the song they posted as their friend walked in, or pulls out a photo and slaps it on the table to produce the same impact it had when they uploaded it to Facebook. Facebook individualism is free of real-world social restraints and the abstract, intensified modes of expression it uses to address others gain a redoubled transformative power in cyberspace, becoming an authentic language of their own. Individualism encounters abstraction, and the two are transformed—through communication—into a public display of group behavior that generates links and relationships all of which require new definitions.

The second conclusion is that in its revolution, Syria has entered a new phase in the history of the Internet. This history has already passed through two basic phases. The first is the phase of connecting to the World Wide Web via a phone line. The user sits at a desk in a room, unable to move from the room, or even alter his posture, as he looks out at the world. The second phase then, is the phase of being in motion while connected, of being able to access the Net from any location without phone lines or costs via smartphones and other technologies that render movement such a dynamic

component of the user's ability to broadcast directly and seamlessly as he travels, wanders about the house or walks the streets. It is as though the obstacle of place—or environment—has vanished, or rather, as though cyberspace has become a meeting place in itself: people can meet up “in the flesh” yet remain connected to, and active in, their networks.

What Syria has added to this rapidly evolving history is to propel this second stage into a new phase; something not unlike the revolution itself in its ability to generate a vast amount of contradictory feelings; something that encompasses clicking a ‘Like’ on some awful image like a shot of a martyred body, a shed tear after reading some story, a chuckle on leaving a comment, and astonishment at encountering some article or idea. There is constant movement within movement, cyberspace in the heart of reality or reality in the heart of cyberspace. There is no real difference in the type of feelings generated and their contradictions, just in the forms of expression utilized by the one who is feeling them, as he walks about, loiters in the café or sits up at home late into the night...”

This is why I stated that “Syria’s Internet and Facebook is made of flesh and blood”. They, just like its revolution, are redefining our relationships with others.

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Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.