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Nicolas Dot-Pouillard

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Middle East, revolt and its reactions

Syria divides the Arab left

The violence deepens and spreads. Yet unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the Syrian revolt has not had unanimous support from the Arab left. There is a split between those who sympathise with the protestors' demands and those who fear foreign interference, both political and military

by Nicolas Dot-Pouillard

Last August the Lebanese leftwing nationalist daily, *Al-Akhbar*, went through its first crisis since its launch in the summer of 2006 (1). Managing editor Khaled Saghieh left the paper he had helped set up, because of its coverage of the Syrian crisis. Saghieh denounced the paper's lack of support for the popular uprising that began in March 2011. *Al-Akhbar* has never denied its political sympathies with Hizbullah, one of Bashar al-Assad's chief allies in the region, or hidden the fact that it prefers dialogue between the Damascus government and a section of the opposition to the fall of Assad's regime. The paper has given a voice to certain members of the Syrian opposition, including Salameh Kaileh, a Syrian-Palestinian Marxist intellectual who was arrested this April by the security services.

In June an article by Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2) provoked dissension within the paper's English online version. The Lebanese commentator placed herself firmly behind the Damascus regime, and criticised supporters of a "third way" — those who denounce the regime while warning against western military intervention on the Libyan model. The same month another *Al-Akhbar English* journalist, Max Blumenthal, announced he was leaving in an article criticising "Assad apologists" within the editorial staff (3).

Al-Akhbar's crisis is symptomatic of the debate dividing the Arab left, ideologically and strategically. Some continue to support the Syrian regime in the name of the struggle against Israel and resistance to imperialism. Others stand staunchly with the opposition, in the name of revolution and the defence of democratic rights. Still others support a middle way between showing solidarity (from a distance) with the protestors' demands for freedom, and rejecting foreign interference: they advocate some kind of national reconciliation. The Syrian crisis is making the Arab left — whether strictly Communist, tending towards Marxist, leftwing nationalist, radical or moderate — seem in disarray.

There is little unequivocal support for the Assad clan, and few people are calling for the regime to carry on as it is; but unconditional supporters of the revolution do not seem to be in the majority either. Most of them are on the far left of the political spectrum, usually Trotskyist (the Socialist Forum in Lebanon, the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt) or Maoist (the Democratic Way in Morocco). They have links with sections of the opposition, such as Ghayath Naisse's Syrian Revolutionary Left. Since spring 2011 they have taken part in occasional demonstrations in front of Syrian embassies and consulates in their own countries. There are also some independent leftwing intellectuals who support insurrection, like the Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi (4). They demand the fall of the regime, and rule out dialogue. Even though they champion peaceful popular protest, they believe the rebels have the right to resort to force of arms. Far left supporters of revolution distance themselves from

the Syrian National Council (SNC) (5), one of the main opposition coalitions, because they believe its links with countries such as Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia could compromise the independence of the popular movement.

A prudent distance

Part of the radical left, though denouncing the Assad regime and calling for its fall, is wary of the support the Gulf monarchies are giving to the Syrian revolutionaries; equally, it dares not subscribe fully to the anti-Assad discourse of the "international community", especially the US. But this anti-imperialist reflex does not take precedence over support for revolution: what counts is the internal situation in Syria, and the principle of popular uprising, as it did in Tunisia and Egypt.

But the majority of the Arab left are maintaining a prudent distance from the Syrian uprising. They condemn its militarisation, which they say only benefits radical Islamist groups and the foreign fighters flocking to Syria. They criticise the sectarianism of the conflict, pitting first Alawite then Christian minorities against a Sunni majority radicalised by repression, which they fear will lead to unending civil war. And they worry about the regional and international balance of power. With Iran and Syria set against the Gulf monarchies, and Russia and China against the US, Syria has been put on the front line of a great international war game. The left tends to favour Iran and Syria, and Russia and China, rather than those they oppose.

A coalition of six leftist and nationalist parties, including Communists and Arab nationalists, met in Amman on 4 April to mark the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. But it was the crisis in Syria, not the fall of Saddam Hussein that dominated discussions. Speakers strongly denounced "foreign intervention" in Syria, and some drew a parallel between the 2003 operation against Iraq and the support of the main western powers for the SNC and the armed opposition in Syria.

The powerful Tunisian General Workers Union (UGTT, some of whose executive members are from the far left) issued a communiqué on 17 May reiterating its support for the democratic demands of the Syrian people, but warning against a "plot" by "colonial and reactionary Arab" states. Two months earlier the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (POCT) and Arab nationalist groups had called a demonstration to protest against the "Friends of Syria" (an organisation that brings together almost 60 international representatives and the SNC) when it held a conference in Tunis.

The Lebanese Communist Party has taken a particularly cautious stance. Although it has published articles in its newspapers by Syrian opposition leaders such as Michel Kilo, who does not belong to the SNC, it has stayed away from the demonstrations that have been taking place over the last year in front of the Syrian embassy in Beirut. What's more, the party has come under fire from Lebanon's far left because part of its leadership remains close to Qadri Jamil's People's Will Party. Jamil is a member of Syria's "official" opposition, and in June Assad appointed him deputy prime minister for the economy in Riad Hijab's government.

Another part of the Arab left calls for a gradual, reformist approach to the Syrian conflict, arguing the solution must be political not military. This position was reflected in the final communiqué from the Arab Nationalist Congress, which brought together around 200 delegates from Arab nationalist and leftist groups, and some Islamists, in Hammamet, Tunisia, in June (6). The document tried to be as consensual as possible. While recognising

the Syrian people's right to "freedom, democracy and the peaceful alternation of power between parties", it condemned violence from all quarters, criticising both the regime and the armed opposition and calling on them to engage in dialogue based on Kofi Annan's March 2012 peace plan.

Two faces

While part of the radical Arab left still believes revolution is on the cards, a much larger proportion has given up on it, since it does not in fact want to see a violent collapse of the regime. The contradiction lies in an unspoken cold war. They fear a power vacuum and a post-Assad Syria reconciled with the US and allied to the Gulf states more than they fear the continuation of the current regime.

Leftwing Arab activists see Syria like Janus, with two faces. Few deny its authoritarian and repressive nature, but even today the regime's defensive arguments, combined with the international sanctions against it, resonate with the Arab left's deeply held anti-imperialist and third worldist convictions. In some these feelings are tempered by an attachment to the popular nature of the revolt; in others they are amplified by the conflict's growing internationalisation.

The Arab Spring gave a boost to Islamists, leading to parties with their origins in the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. No doubt this has caused some on the left to move the other way, fearing Arab revolutions because they could lead to Islamist hegemony. The Ennahda Movement in Tunisia, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, appear as ardent supporters of the Syrian opposition. So the position that much of the Arab left takes on Syria reflects its own clash with political Islam. That is why parties that normally claim to be "revolutionary" and "progressive", even if they are not necessarily Marxist, are, paradoxically, hoping for a negotiated solution and gradual transition in Syria, for fear of disillusionment in the future.

Nicolas Dot-Pouillard is a researcher at the French Institute for the Near East in Beirut

(1) *Al-Akhbar* published the Arabic edition of *Le Monde diplomatique* as a supplement for one year.

(2) "Syrian Crisis: Three's a Crowd", *Al-Akhbar English,* 12 June 2012.

(3) Max Blumenthal, "The right to resist is universal: a farewell to *Al-Akhbar* and Assad's apologists", *Al-Akhbar English,* 20 June 2012.

(4) Fawwaz Traboulis teaches history at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, and is a former leading member of the Communist Action Organisation in Lebanon (OACL).

(5) The Syrian National Council was set up in summer 2011 and is based in Istanbul. It brings together a large part of the Syrian opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

(6) The Arab Nationalist Congress includes Baathist and Nasserist groupings, plus leftwing parties such as Morocco's Unified Socialist Party, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Yemeni Socialist Party.