"Syrian revolutionaries owe nobody an apology"
Fawwaz Traboulsi interviewed by Mohammed Al Attar

Lebanese thinker, author and Leftist activist Fawwaz Traboulsi has clearly voiced his support for the Arab revolutions and followed their progress as a writer and analyst, culminating in his 2012 book *Democracy is Revolution*. In this interview, Traboulsi talks about the situation in Syria and the thorny relationship of Lebanon's various parties with the Syrian revolution. He also provides an overview of the stance taken by the Left towards the Syrian as well as the Arab revolutions.

Mohammed Al Attar: As the Syrian revolution approaches its second anniversary we're seeing an unprecedented escalation of violence by the regime's rampant military being met with an increasingly strong response by the opposition's armed resistance, and yet there seems little possibility of a military solution in the near future. The political scene has never looked more complex than it does today. How do you read the current situation in Syria and its possible developments?

Fawwaz Traboulsi: It almost goes without saying that Syria's blood-drenched crisis is extremely complex. But complexity does not mean that we cannot think about it, break it down into its constituent elements and plot the directions in which it might evolve. This past year did not differ significantly from the one before, specifically from the point at which peaceful protests began demanding limited reforms, principally the abolition of emergency law. The regime's response has remained unchanged from the outset. At first, it refused to acknowledge the existence of internal problems that needed to be addressed. The security services' initial approach was unambiguous and direct. The emergency laws were replaced by a counter-terrorism law, a strategy which culminated in the Clock Square massacre in Homs, and which was clearly intended to prevent a repeat of events in Tunisia, Egypt and even Yemen, where protest movements occupied the public squares.

It needs to be emphasized here that the counter-terrorism law was aimed first and foremost at the United States, a continuation of the same technique used by Arab tyrants to secure American goodwill by means of an endlessly repeated message to the effect that they – the tyrants – were partners in a global war on terror, hoping to secure their legitimacy abroad in defiance of their subject peoples. It's no coincidence that this approach received a warm welcome from the Russian Federation, with its obsession over the Central Asian republics and a bloody war in Chechnya. The corollary of this was a view of the populist protest movements as a war-like threat that necessitated a military response over and above the standard security measures. This approach has remained unchanged to this very day. It was and remains a war, even though it has morphed from being a war against "destructive groups" into one against the "al-Qaeda organization".

Air strikes is something of a double-edged sword: while it makes it quite clear that the regime has not the slightest compunction about causing the most terrible human losses,

widespread devastation and waves of displacement, resorting to warplanes is also an admission that the policy of a speedy resolution has failed. You can't win battles from the air alone. You can wreak havoc to your heart's content, but you can't control people unless you first control the ground, and that is now more or less impossible. The regime's army has lost control of most of the suburbs and hinterland of the major cities and given the unfeasibility of regaining it, the "assured victory" will never be realised. The armed opposition, meanwhile, is able to lose battles without any single encounter proving decisive to its overall chances.

The regime has a penchant for what used to be known as "externalizing crises", i.e. placing responsibility for them on foreign parties – either accusing them of pulling strings behind the scene or bringing them in as mediators in the conflict between the regime and significant segments of its population. The entire people and their demands were sidelined for months, with the world listening to the regime's promises of reform, a bubble that finally burst with the regime's issuing of a constitution which only strengthened the dictatorial powers of the head of state.

If we suppose that American and Western plans favour the destruction and fragmentation of Syria – as a people, if not as an entity – (as advocated by adherents of the Israeli-American and the New Middle-East schools of thought) then we see that the regime itself has been charged with the task carrying it out, its capacity for murder and devastation outstripping the imaginations of Washington's most cold-blooded pragmatists. The question is: Why doesn't the regime reach an accommodation with its people, instead of insisting that its opponents are foreign agents? Why not cut out these foreign powers? Why does it prefer to negotiate with the foreign masters of its rebellious populace who live abroad?

To sum up, I believe that the dream of a decisive resolution has come to an end with the passing of another year and the failure of the policy of systematic destruction from the air. On the other hand, while the armed resistance has steadfastly eroded the regime's military power it does not possess the weaponry needed to tip the odds in its favour. Clearly, Western policy still balks at supplying the resistance with the arms needed to achieve this goal.

For a while now the phrase "Syrian revolution" has lost some of its currency in the world press. Even "Syrian crisis" is less common than before. There is now a widespread use of "civil war" accompanied by an increasing focus on sectarian aspects of the conflict, which were highlighted by a recent UN report. A considerable number of Syrians feel very bitter when they see their efforts reduced to such descriptions. How do you see it?

It is a revolution, because it gives voice to two impossible conditions: that there are rulers who may no longer remain in power, and that there are peoples who can no longer put up with their rule. (And by rulers we are not talking just about individuals, but rather a system of control). Furthermore, these are revolutions that do not hide their causes: unemployment, dictatorship, social divides, the citizen's abused dignity. To which they roar back: Work! Freedom! Social justice! Human dignity!

The revolutions are a response to the impasse reached by all Arabic dictatorial regimes (whether monarchies or republics): their legitimacy abroad is crumbling and their legitimacy at home is lost. They no longer guarantee their people the most basic level of services and means of social distribution and this has lost them the legitimacy they derived from their role in national liberation and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

These are dictatorial regimes whose repressive tendencies have increased in step with the gradual strengthening of the hegemony of globalizing and neoliberal creeds in the region and the commensurate reduction of social services they have provided to their peoples. This is why I call the revolutions the "third wave of the Arab anti-neoliberal resistance". The first wave struck in the late 1970s and early '80s, most notably in Egypt's bread riots and the uprising of the *Heitiyeen* (the "loiterers" or unemployed) in Algeria. The second came in the 1990s and gave rise to uprisings in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt and the bread riots in Yemen's urban centers. In this third wave, each and every one of the Arab states caught up in the revolutions set out to oppose the removal of subsidies on fuel and food or the rising cost of living, at which point the authorities' response provoked these movements into proposing radical political change in the form of bringing down the regime.

It was a revolution of the peripheries: the rural population, the poor, the marginalized and the inhabitants of the deprived suburbs that ring the major cities. It was from these roots that it first sprung before moving into the cities and the capital itself. There's no denying that large numbers of middle class citizens, young people and members of the bourgeoisie in exile participated in various ways to this movement. It is just that the Syrian revolution is still largely characterized by its profoundly populist nature.

Let's not forget that most Syrians prefer to describe their revolution as a "revolution for dignity". There were a number of slogans employed in the early days, particularly in the outlying urban districts and the countryside, which emphasized that it was not a revolution of the hungry or an uprising based on economic demands. [1]

I'd like to say something about the "revolution of dignity". I fully understand that this phrase has arisen from four decades of the daily affront to human dignity meted out by the regime in its dealings with the Syrian people. Derogatory and abusive terms like "Boy!" and "Donkey!" still ring in their ears, and the Lebanese, too, suffered these humiliations during the Syrian mandate. Nevertheless, I'd like to imagine that the revolution of dignity has been triumphant. After all, isn't the opposition's program to solve the Syrian people's problems based entirely on the all-encompassing concept of

[1] Following the first death casualty in a Deraa protest south of Syria, the state political and information advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, said on March 24, 2011, in a first official response to the popular uprising that the government approved a package of political decisions and services to address the demands of the protesters. To this, the demonstrators responded with a slogan that became a driving motto in the Syrian revolution: "Ya Bouthaina ya Shabaan ash-shaab as-suri mu juan" – "Oh Buthaina Shaaban, the Syrian people are not hungry", indicating that they were asking for freedom and dignity, not food.

dignity? Isn't unemployment an offence to the dignity of individuals and communities alike? What about poverty and impoverishment: can they co-exist with dignity? Doesn't the closing off of young Syrians' hopes for the future represent the very apogee of contempt for the idea that man has an intrinsic worth?

Let us understand one another. Does the slogan "Freedom" incorporate the idea of economic freedom? We can rest assured that the alternative elites will only recreate the circumstances that led to the revolution. We've started to see this in the policies of Egypt's Salvation Front, when Amr Moussa called for reaching an agreement with President Morsi to prevent labor strikes and restrict the rights of workers and unions. From the perspective of human dignity – this being our topic – aren't employment, accommodation, drinking water, healthcare and a safe environment also human rights? Or do these areas not get mentioned in the majority of human rights workshops, pamphlets, conferences, seminars and training sessions precisely because neoliberal ideology wants them (even if they have been the state's responsibility) to be subjected to privatization and commodification and exposed to capital and the profit principle.

I realize that class struggle is out of fashion these days and I know that many intellectuals – including the vast majority of those on the Left – neglect the economic factor, to distance themselves from what they call interest-based explanations. I'd go so far as to say that their real achievement has been to prove that everything that has happened is either political or cultural not to mention "geostrategic" and "geopolitical". This is why imperialism, along with its local rulers and associated elites, has been the ultimate victor.

When the Syrian president tells his friends and visitors that he doesn't care if the Damascus suburbs are destroyed because he can build new cities to replace them, isn't he practicing a kind of classism – indeed a classist extermination – against poverty and the poor in the name of modernity and cleanliness?

I believe that the decline of these regimes' nationalist legitimacy, plus the decline in their provision of social services (which begins with Saudi Arabia, where some forty per cent of the population are classified as poor, and by no means ends with Syria!) has pushed the tragedy of the younger generation to the forefront. This, in a region which boasts two global highs: the highest rate of unemployment and the highest number of young people as a proportion of the overall population.

The Syria opposition is standing on the threshold of a new era, one that may see them – or some of them – rise to positions of power. It would be a good idea for them to take a good look around and observe what's in store for them and what has been, or is being, implemented in other countries. More importantly, any group that takes power in this new phase will soon see people take against them and the protests start up again, precisely because of the economic situation. Look how the people welcomed President Marzouki in Sidi Bouzeid: with shoes! As for democracy being a priority, I don't think political democracy means much if it can't end the autocratic monopoly of power and place political decision-making (and by extension social and economic decision-making) in the hands of the broadest possible spectrum of the wider public, operating on the

principle of the people choosing their rulers, holding them to account and changing them if needs be. Responding to the slogan "Bread and Freedom" by saying that we need freedom but not bread is quite exceptionally naïve, though I wouldn't go so far as to say that it's a classist sentiment that seeks to deprecate the material needs and social rights of the citizenry. The poor in the countryside and cities want freedom, something they have proved with blood and great sacrifice, and quite contrary to theories that link democratic impulses with the urban middle class.

Having followed events on the ground, and knowing what you do of its negative consequences, was there ever any hope of avoiding an armed resistance?

The military option wasn't an option, it was a response to a war waged by the regime against a non-violent insurrectionist people. But just let me take a moment to talk about the concept of non-violence. In Syria, as in the other revolutionary countries, vast numbers of people took to the streets the length and breadth of the land. They used their strength, the strength of numbers, to impose their demands. In rare cases, the ruler or regime responded to this kind of pressure. Morocco is one example of this, whatever our feelings on the limited nature of the subsequent reforms.

In Syria, a vast public force, the like of which had never been seen in the country's modern history, was countered first with a security strategy and then by the military. Large segments of the non-violent protest movement made the switch to applying pressure through force of arms. Any soldier who refused to fire on demonstrators was executed on the spot. His comrades split up, fled and formed armed resistance groups with a death sentence hanging over them. In the civil society movement, after four or five successive waves of coordinators had been detained, chucked into prison and tortured (some to the point of death) some of those who were yet to be arrested or killed started saying: better that I die fighting than perish under torture. Militarization is thus the offspring of the regime's decision to meet popular pressure with state violence, provoking violence from the population in return.

Syrian revolutionaries owe nobody an apology, nor should they have to waste their time explaining why they "neglected other options", seeing that this magnificent people continues to mount non-violent demonstrations whenever the opportunity presents itself, to affirm its presence and its permanent readiness for non-violent action. The only thing that requires explanation is their position on foreign funding and support. Anyone who experienced what Syrian citizens have lived through, witnessed the full extent of the repression and slaughter and was forced to take up arms, would look for weapons everywhere they could. The regime that forced them to take up arms is what is forcing them to accept funding for their armed enterprise. It is no secret that armed revolutions have financial requirements completely unrelated to the domestic capacities of the population in question.

These funds should be seen as debts that will be subsequently used to influence the new Syrian authorities, if not hold them to ransom.

There can be little doubt that the situation in Syria makes it too difficult for foreign forces to intervene. Yet this is the greatest excuse of all, because the opposition grows ever more patriotic and refuses to see itself as indebted to anyone, whilst in reality it is the creditor. The rulers who support it, do so to prevent revolutions in their own countries, to block the transmission of the revolutionary virus to their populations. They will not bring the revolution to an end. The ruler who funds protests or armed revolutions does so rather to prevent the establishment of effective national democracies in these countries and to propagate a monolithic model of governance in the region: a capitalist profit-based, conformist Islamist (Salafist and Brotherhood) model.

Is it the end of the revolution as revolution when it transforms, in at least one of its aspects, into a civil conflict? In your opinion, is the classification "civil war" – which has become widely used in the media, and the Western media especially, as well as Western institutes and research centers – an objective description of reality? (Especially since this usage is by no means a new one, with some individuals assiduously deploying it in recent months).

Absolutely not: the revolution is not over when one of its offshoots turns into civil war. Most revolutions lead to civil war whether we like it or not. It should be emphasized: not using the phrase civil war does not change the fact that there are two militarized groups fighting until one defeats the other or both are so worn down that they end up at some form of stalemate.

What worries me is that things in Syria will continue to progress in the direction of a sectarian-type solution. Most of the foreign powers involved contribute, whether openly or implicitly, to this sectarian narrative and its ability to achieve a settlement or a solution. This is the big danger. The idea of the president stepping down and a subsequent transition period has inspired much debate on the putative president and prime minister's sectarian identity, rather than a discussion about establishing a national conference and reformulating the constitution, the political system and the laws based on a consideration of real-world problems. The Saudi-Gulf axis has never seen this as a democratic struggle, but rather as a sectarian issue: a war against Iran being prosecuted in Syria. The US narrative relies on ethnicities, minorities and neoliberalism. Remember Hillary Clinton's demands of President Morsi: rights for Copts and women. American policy has not got out of the habit of seducing liberals with fantasies then abandoning them in favour of Islamists. What happened to the Islamic menace? American policy makes use of the Islamists who reproduce authoritarian power structures, arguing that moderate Islam provides a bulwark against its extremist and jihadist variants.

This leads me to ask you about a dilemma facing the revolution. There are calls and demands to reassure the minorities, yet at the same time the revolution must strive to become a state of rights and citizenship, free of sectarian allocation and all privileges that run counter to these principles. Isn't there a contradiction here?

The fact is I haven't seen or heard any clear explanation of how the minorities are going to be brought on board in Syria. Inclusive slogans were certainly present in the street but

it was not evident on the level of the main political forces. These political players have to reflect this message unambiguously. For example, political discourse has not succeeded in convincing the majority of Kurds – even those neutral towards the revolution – that a future Syria will bring them a just resolution of their cause. Almost all the political forces have resorted to the "imposing reality on the ground" option. There are some genuinely involved discussions over the issue, but these are confined to intellectual circles; while political leaders and veterans seek to delay the matter until after the "victory" has been achieved, reject it in favour of other priorities, or confine themselves to disapproving of Syria's Kurdish region being named "West Kurdistan".

How do you see the Syrian revolution influencing Lebanon, in light of domestic Lebanese disagreement over the issue?

First of all, I think we need to do away with the idea of causal, ontological relationships and secondly, that Syria, as a state and society, will be too bloody and bruised to play the part of Lebanon's guardian (there's a silver lining to every cloud). On the other hand it's hardly to be expected that one side will win in Lebanon and another will lose, as a result. Never forget that Lebanon has a peculiar parliamentary system, though the electoral law predetermines the outcome of elections. To speak frankly, I myself, as a Lebanese citizen, didn't regard it as the slightest bit significant when the parliamentary majority was overturned and the March 14 camp replaced the March 8 camp and formed a new government. We've tried both of them and reaped nothing but disaster for the most basic human and citizenship rights.

When it comes to Hezbollah and its weapons, the heart of this issue, in my view, will be the nature of the next Syrian state and the policies pursued by its governments. Will hostility between Syria and Israel be ended by a peace treaty in which some or all of the Golan is returned? Suppose it were (though this is highly unlikely given what has happened in Syria and the settlers' control of Israeli policy): the Syrian government would be obliged, by both regional and international players to include Lebanon in the normalization process. Otherwise, I see no reason for the existence of a Syrian government that has no control over its army or ability to develop its capabilities to confront Israel. In such a case, would it not be in Syria's interest to have a strong Lebanon alongside it? However, in response to a hypothetical future Syrian government wanting to revenge itself on Hezbollah (and personally I don't believe that vengeance drives policy even in the Arab world) I would say that it wouldn't have the capability to do so. The possibility of halting the flow of arms to Hezbollah remains an option, given that Hezbollah continues to suffer a huge decline in its popularity in Lebanon, Syria and internationally, for its continued support of the Syrian regime, even affecting its role in the anti-Israeli resistance.

As for Hezbollah's weapons, I can't see any Syrian position that would consider weakening Lebanon's defensive capabilities to be in Syria's national interest. For the first time in history, Lebanon has a defensive force capable of deterring Israel. Is that against the interests of a future Syrian state? Hezbollah is now an armed force that does not

exercise its force of arms. Until we reach a solution that sees the country's two defensive forces united (i.e. Hezbollah's army and the Lebanese Army) I will continue to regard Hezbollah's weapons, and its heavy weapons in particular, as part of Lebanon's defensive arsenal.

I'd like to wrap up this point by saying that the arrival of a new regime in Syria might lend hope and impetus to those Lebanese who have long despaired of the farcical, counterproductive and meaningless division between the March 14 and March 8 parties, both of which have taken turns ruling with the same degree of corruption, waste and impotence. There has been a great deal of anger over the support shown by growing numbers of the Syrian opposition for the March 14 camp, seen as provocative by those (by no means confined to forces allied with the March 8) who did not belong to this camp. Nevertheless, I believe these forces will not despair of the Syrian opposition and will not use this bias to form a position on the opposition, nor to take revenge for it.

In one of your articles you criticized what you called "the Left that supports dictatorship on the pretext of nationalism." Do you believe that at least some of the Left has missed a historical opportunity?

The vast majority of the communist and socialist parties in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, can be classified as opponents of tyranny. They became part of the new dispensation, but they are on the weaker side. The problem of this weaker side is that it has to confront powerful opponents such as the Islamists, who possess a comprehensive and integrated worldview. The Left is afflicted with a lack of vision: its only concern is to establish its intellectual and political independence from both its friends and enemies. This is its biggest problem, not to mention the historical weight of the Party – with its unilateral decrees, its demand for praise and its doctrinaire hatred for democracy as a "bourgeois" system – which still oppresses the Left.

Nevertheless, I maintain that there is still a place for the Left. Theoretically at least, it remains capable of uniting nationalism with democracy and social justice. The only condition is that its role should be constrained by an obligation to prioritize the people. This entails liberating it from its doctrinal, avant-garde, elitist attitude towards the people, a legacy shared by all communist and nationalist parties reared on "the power of the word".

The interview was conducted in Beirut on February 20th, 2013.