

# “The War on Syria”? Patrick Higgins’s war on the truth

Wednesday 7 October 2015, by [Louis Proyect](#) (Date first published: 29 August 2015).

Perhaps the oddest thing about the Baathist propaganda piece by Patrick Higgins in *Jacobin* is that it appeared at all. Titled “The War on Syria” [1], it is the sort of item that appeared with great frequency in 2012 and that came to a climax in late 2013 when what appeared to be thousands of articles flooded across the leftwing of the Internet warning about Obama’s readiness to invade Syria over “red lines” being crossed in East Ghouta. Careful examination of the military and political record, however, would reveal that no such thing was in the offing as I pointed out in a CounterPunch article titled “Why Obama Did Not Make War on Syria” [2]. Indeed, just when so much of the left was running around like Chicken Little, it was exactly when Obama was on the phone with Iran exploring rapprochement—the country that supposedly he was bent on destroying.

Higgins’s article is focused on a book edited by Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi that supposedly contains articles calling for “some projection of American power”. If you are worried about such a projection, why not make Kobane a litmus test rather than anything the FSA has done? This is where American air power proved decisive in dislodging ISIS from a Kurdish town. While much of the left was beside itself with joy over this turn of events, it somehow pirouetted around the alliance between American air power and Kurdish fighters who provided coordinates so that ISIS could be blasted to smithereens. In keeping with its hostility to the FSA, *Jacobin* ran an article about Kobane [3] that drew a distinction between the Kurdish fighters and the FSA that was alleged to be a tool of Western imperialism. Somehow, the authors failed to read newspaper accounts about who was relying on imperialism:

*"Talal Raman, a 36-year-old Kurdish fighter, worked on a Samsung tablet, annotating a Google Earth map marked with the positions of the deserted apartment buildings and crumbling villas from where his colleagues were battling Islamic State fighters south of this northern Syrian town. He pinpointed in yellow the positions where his men were hunkered behind a wall, and highlighted in red the coordinates of a building next to a mosque where Islamic State fighters had taken cover.*

“Our comrades can see the enemy moving at the GPS address I just sent you,” he wrote in Arabic to a handler hundreds of miles away in a United States military operations room. Then he waited for the American warplanes to scream in.

The tight coordination of American air power with the militia, known as the Y.P.G., from the Kurdish initials for People’s Protection Units, has dealt the Islamic State its most significant setbacks across an enormous strip of northern Syria near the Turkish border in recent months."

*NY Times*, August 10, 2015

Higgins is far more patient with the Kurdish militia than he is with the FSA:

*"Amid the brutal sectarian strife across Syria and the Middle East, the PYD’s project in Rojava has over the past year understandably appeared as a spark of hope to many leftists in the West. Their admiration is not misplaced.*

But it must still be said that the future of Rojava very much rests on how much room the PYD decides to give to the United States as it considers exploiting the party to deepen divides in Syria."

I don't know how much more room there is to give in light of them supplying GPS coordinates. That's cheek by jowl, isn't it?

You can bet that if the FSA was supplying GPS coordinates to American jets that were dropping bombs on Baathist troops, you'd see Higgins screaming bloody murder. He is up in arms when the question of "right to protect" comes up in the Postel-Hashemi book but is remarkably patient when it comes to the biggest projection of American air power anywhere in the world today. In fact, I would bet a small fortune that Higgins is okay with American jets now targeting the al-Nusra front since everybody knows that al-Qaeda must be stopped. That is, everybody who has read their Christopher Hitchens.

Higgins presents an addled history of the war in Syria that is meant to demonize the FSA. He claims that they were champing at the bit to make war, even within the first month of the Syrian protests in 2011 when they slaughtered 120 Baathist cops in Jisr al-Shughour out of the blue between June 3<sup>rd</sup> and June 6<sup>th</sup>, according to a BBC article to which Higgins linked. What would have been useful to point out, however, is that the BBC was merely quoting Syrian television that had a vested interest in making the opposition look as bloodthirsty as possible. If Higgins would have us take the word of the BBC on what happened in Jisr al-Shughour, he might have taken the trouble to mention a follow-up report from the BBC on the roots of the conflict there [\[4\]](#):

*"On 3 June, after Friday prayers, protesters gathered in Jisr al-Shughour to demonstrate against the Syrian government. At least one man was killed. Activists say Baseel al-Masri was shot by government security forces.*

Masri was buried the following day. Mohammed Fazo, an activist using a pseudonym, told the BBC around 15,000 people attended the funeral procession. He said he personally witnessed what happened next.

"During the funeral, snipers on the roof of the post office building fired at the protesters," he said.

This is apparently corroborated by another eyewitness, by the name of Abu Abdulla. "There was indiscriminate shooting at the protesters," he told the BBC by phone."

But none of this would have been useful to someone serving as a lawyer for the Baathist dictatorship, and a cheap one at that. To back up his claims about what took place at Jisr al-Shughour, Higgins cites Joshua Landis, a scholar who once wrote in the *NY Times*: "For Mr. Assad to help the United States, he must have sufficient backing from Washington to put greater restrictions and pressure on the Sunni majority." Well, no matter. After recounting local protesters' outrage over having been fired upon by snipers and their determination to use arms to defend themselves if necessary, Landis can only conclude that they had "a compelling argument". This is not an argument that Higgins would find so compelling given his obvious cherry-picking approach to Landis's piece. That is how propaganda works, after all. You only take what you need to suit your political agenda—the truth be damned.

Higgins cites a *Washington Post* article dated June 12<sup>th</sup> that alleges that "the CIA has trained and equipped nearly 10,000 fighters sent into Syria over the past several years", something that prompts him to state: "In other words, the United States launched a full-scale war against Syria, and few Americans actually noticed." Well, I don't know about a few Americans but as someone who reads *Global Research*, *WSWS.org*, *Salon.com*, the *Nation Magazine*, *CounterPunch*, *DissidentVoice*, and

*Jacobin* on a fairly regular basis, the notion of America being in a full-scale war with Syria is old news—even if it is bullshit. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in January on this CIA aid, something that falls far short of Higgins's hysterical account [5]:

*"Some weapons shipments were so small that commanders had to ration ammunition. One of the U.S.'s favorite trusted commanders got the equivalent of 16 bullets a month per fighter. Rebel leaders were told they had to hand over old antitank missile launchers to get new ones—and couldn't get shells for captured tanks. When they appealed last summer for ammo to battle fighters linked to al Qaeda, the U.S. said no."*

That's some full-scale war.

To show that he has a sense of humor, Higgins writes that there is a central contradiction in Syrian politics that belies the notion that a revolution of any kind has been taking place there. When I noticed that the words "central contradiction" had a hyperlink, I became curious to see where it went. Well, it connected to an article by Mao Zedong titled "On Contradiction". I laughed my head off, especially seeing this in *Jacobin*. *MRZine* I could understand but *Jacobin* with all its ISO buddies? Well, maybe Maoism explains Higgins's stupidity. I saw the best minds of my generation—well, maybe the nearly best—destroyed by the *Little Red Book* 40 years ago. Too bad it is still rotting out brains in 2015.

A large portion of Higgins's article is taken up with the task of disproving allegations that the Baathist state relies on Alawite sectarianism. His arguments are so absurd on the face of it, there is very little need to bother with them. However, the idea that because Iran funds the PFLP, the Syria-Iran bloc cannot be sectarian is so preposterous that something must be said. Once again showing evidence that he doesn't even read the articles he links to, Higgins neglects to mention that the article he cites—Iran Increases Aid to PFLP [6]—is clear about the strictly pecuniary basis of these ties:

*"Following the resumption of Iranian support, there will soon be a dramatic increase in the strength of the PFLP's military wing, the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, after the internal reorganization of the group is completed," the sources said.*

The PFLP has come out in support of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's position on the Syrian crisis. PFLP officials have made pro-regime statements and held Gaza rallies in which participants raised pictures of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah."

In other words, Iran is paying for the PFLP's support for Bashar al-Assad. Only someone so cynical about the Middle East as Higgins would interpret this as a break with sectarianism. It can better be described as succumbing to bribery. In fact the article reports that when Hamas threw its moral support behind the Syrian revolt, Iranian money dried up. When it ultimately decided to get with the program and line up behind Assad, the money started flowing again. It is quite remarkable that an American leftist can get behind such political horse-trading, the Middle East version of Donald Trump giving money to buy politicians. One supposes that when it comes to writing propaganda for the Baathist goons, all bets are off.

Attempting to show that he is not a complete Baathist tool, Higgins recommends something called the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change that would like to see democracy and fair play in Syria—bully for them. Perhaps the most useful way of putting the NCCDC into context is to refer to an *Al-Akhbar* article written in 2011 [7] that described the group as having an outlook that "is out of touch with the prevailing sentiment of the uprising, which seems intent on toppling the regime." This is a newspaper that Max Blumenthal described as loaded with Assad apologists so

one might think that another apologist like Higgins might have been smart enough to avoid trying to con his readers with a cheer for such an impotent formation.

Unable to ignore the obvious realities, Higgins is forced to admit that it was rural poverty that fueled the protests in 2011. But have no fear, our boy is sure not to give the revolt more legitimacy than it deserves because it “lacked a vision and, therefore, any revolutionary agent.” Maybe these poor benighted hungry peasants should have been reading The Little Red Book instead of the Quran. That would have assuaged him, one gathers.

When discussing political Islam’s role in the Syrian uprising, Higgins is sure to remind his readers that the “conservative” Muslim Brotherhood is lurking behind the scenes, a curse to all progressive-minded and secular governments in the Middle East. General al-Sisi knew how to deal with these troublemakers, gaining Bashar al-Assad’s blessing who also understood that state-sanctioned murder gets results.

On his blog [8], Higgins had a comment about the Brotherhood that pretty much sums up his outlook on Middle East politics:

*“As for the SNC [Syrian National Council], it was run by a group with leanings to which the American public would not be sympathetic, the Muslim Brotherhood, but it was fronted by liberals.”*

Don’t you just love the bit about “leanings to which the American public would not be sympathetic”? This is the kind of dreary Islamophobic cant that runs like a shit stain across the entire “anti-imperialist” left. It is sad that *Jacobin* would spread these feces around so liberally in any number of articles but I suppose you can say that at least they are not much worse than the rest of the left when it comes to Syria. It is a kind of political and spiritual malaise that future historians will be at a loss to explain when they look back at the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. God give them the strength to penetrate through the filth and, unlike Higgins, tell the truth.

## Louis Proyect

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## P.S.

\* “Patrick Higgins’s war on the truth”. August 29, 2015:

<http://louisproyect.org/2015/08/29/patrick-higginss-war-on-the-truth/>

\* “Jacobin and “The War on Syria””. AUGUST 31, 2015. CounterPunch has published a somewhat revised version of this article.

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/31/jacobin-and-the-war-on-syria/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/syria-civil-war-nato-military-intervention/>

[2] <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/11/06/why-obama-did-not-make-war-on-syria/>

[3] <http://louisproyect.org/2015/01/08/a-response-to-a-jacobin-article-on-kobane/>

- [4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13857654>
- [5] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582>
- [6] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iran-pflp-gaza-palestine-syria.html>
- [7] <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syrian-opposition-still-weak-and-divided>
- [8] <http://www.catsnotwar.com/2015/02/the-party-of-god-in-syria.html>