

Syria and solidarity: The left can't be silent about Assad's crimes

Saturday 5 May 2018, by [AKRAM-BOSHAR Shireen](#), [BOTTA Emma Wilde](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2018).

Focusing only on U.S. policy in Syria fails to grasp the dynamic of a counterrevolution against a popular uprising, explain Shireen Akram-Boshar and Emma Wilde Botta.

AN ARTICLE at *Jacobin* by Greg Shupak headlined "U.S. Out of Syria" provides an analysis of the U.S. government role in Syria that is at best misleading and at worst a compilation of dangerous conspiracy theories [1].

Shupak's article begins by casting doubt on the idea that the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons in its scorched-earth war, before pivoting to an exclusive focus on the role of the U.S. in the conflict.

In doing so, Shupak renders invisible the crimes of the Assad regime, which is responsible for the vast majority of the carnage in Syria and has indiscriminately targeted civilians with all manner of barbaric weaponry, including but not limited to chemical weapons.

With his arguments, Shupak joins a section of the left that apologizes for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and the Russian and Iranian interventions that have propped him up. By taking this position, they ally themselves with forces that have worked to crush the Syrian revolution and the broader Arab Spring.

This is a disastrous position that buys into "war on terror" logic, strips the Syrian people of their agency and sets a dangerous precedent for future uprisings.

As revolutionary socialists, we recognize that U.S. military intervention anywhere is against the interests of all working people. We agree that U.S. intervention in Syria and elsewhere should be opposed unequivocally. We agree, too, with Shupak's statement that "there is no positive role that America and its allies can play through intervention" and that "we must prevent our governments from inflicting more damage abroad."

Indeed, we will need to rebuild an antiwar movement from the ground up to make this happen. But arguments like Shupak's, which provide cover for a dictatorial regime guilty of war crimes, make this project more difficult.

THE LEFT has been split on the question of Syria since the start of the Syrian uprising seven years ago when millions of ordinary Syrians, inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt [2], rose up to demand freedom and equality in March 2011.

For the first time in generations, Syrians of all sects largely came together to participate in the early uprising, including Kurds and Palestinians, as they broke through a culture of silence and fear under a ruthless dictatorship.

The Syrian revolution, like the various regional uprisings, expressed solidarity with the masses of Arab workers and with Palestinians against Israel's settler-colonial regime. Some on the left mischaracterize the uprising as a revolt led by militant Islamists with foreign backing. In reality, it was a genuine expression of popular outrage.

Syria's uprising was one of the most advanced of the Arab Spring. Students and workers established Local Coordinating Committees that created networks of activists across the country, free newspapers and media where only regime media had existed previously, and nationwide Friday protests organized under slogans that were anti-intervention, anti-sectarian and promoted nonviolence.

Within the first two years, large sections of the country were liberated from the regime, where people elected their own local councils and began to manage their own affairs, from education and media to the resettlement of internally displaced Syrians.

The Assad regime responded [3] with an all-out war [4].

It shot down peaceful protesters, besieged towns, and began campaigns of mass arrests and torture. At the infamous Saydnaya prison alone, more than 13,000 Syrians [5], predominantly nonviolent activists arrested in the early days of the uprising, have been hanged.

The regime stoked sectarian tensions in order to pit sections of the population against each other and quell widespread support for the uprising. Islamist fundamentalists were purposively released from regime prisons in order to undermine the largely secular revolt [6].

BY FACILITATING the creation of jihadist brigades with selective releases of prisoners [7], the regime created the terrorists it claimed to be fighting—and then used “war on terror” logic to justify the slaughter of any opposition.

Assad then launched attacks on a sectarian basis [8]. He cynically courted Kurds in northern Syria by largely withdrawing his forces from Kurdish-majority towns and focusing his firepower elsewhere, in an effort to divide Arabs from Kurds.

While the Syrian people chanted, “The Syrian people are one,” the regime declared “Assad or we burn the country.” And burn the country they have.

In 2012, Assad began to bomb entire neighborhoods that had rebelled. Since then, the regime has dropped nearly 70,000 barrel bombs [9]—large containers filled with nails, steel, gasoline, and other objects, typically thrown out of helicopters, that attack indiscriminately.

Shupak notes that the majority of Syrians still living in the country “are in government-held territories.” This is true. It is because the Assad regime has barrel-bombed and imposed starvation sieges on nearly every town and city that rebelled since 2011, depopulating the majority of Syria that had liberated itself from regime control.

This barbarism has displaced half of the Syrian population, with 6 million people now refugees beyond Syria's borders and another 6 million internally displaced.

UN fact-finding missions have concluded that the Assad regime used chemical weapons more than two dozen times. Still, regime apologists have suggested that the April 7 attack never happened, that rebels must have gassed themselves, and that Assad had no reason to stage the attack as the ruling power clearly winning the war.

This logic would hit a wall when asked to explain why Israel uses white phosphorus in Gaza, why the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and why the world's strongest imperial powers decimate the regions they are fighting against.

WHEN THE Syrian uprising began, leftists had to make a choice—support a popular uprising or a murderous dictator [10]. Sections of the left reverted to old paradigms about U.S. imperialism in the Middle East that were always incomplete, and that certainly today no longer fit the context of the region. They mistakenly viewed the U.S. as the main aggressor in Syria and ignored the actions of the Syrian people in 2011.

Shupak joins the chorus of left voices who maintain that the U.S. intervened in Syria with the primary aim of toppling the regime, claiming “The CIA’s effort to oust the Syrian government has been one of the costliest covert-action programs in the agency’s history.”

A study of the actual U.S. intervention in Syria shows that the U.S. was not pursuing regime change.

Since the start of the uprising, the U.S. has been hesitant to decisively support anti-Assad forces, most notably denying them anti-aircraft weaponry that would be necessary to combat the regime’s air war. Once it became apparent that Iran would prop up the Assad regime, and ISIS invaded Syria from Iraq, the U.S. dropped any pretense of being against Assad and narrowly focused on fighting ISIS.

In late 2014, three years since March 2011, the U.S. began bombing ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army brigades [11].

Troops on the ground were concentrated in the northern Kurdish-majority region where the U.S. formed a tactical alliance with the Kurdish-led YPG [12], in large part because they would only fight their murderous enemies in ISIS, and not the regime.

As the U.S. specifically funneled funding toward rebel factions that would fight ISIS alone, this pushed many factions that wanted to fight the regime towards fundamentalist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, which had funding, arms and better training.

Though undoubtedly the U.S. is still the dominant world power, it is far from the sole imperial threat to Syria’s sovereignty. While regime apologists claim that those who oppose Assad must be calling for foreign intervention, principled anti-imperialists recognize that foreign intervention is the reason Assad remained in power, even as Syrians liberated their cities from his rule.

In 2013, Iranian intervention [13] saved the regime, and in 2015, Russian intervention fortified the counterrevolution [14]. Iran has supplied foot soldiers to make up for the Syrians who defected from Assad’s army, and Russia has provided bombs and aircraft. Both have spent billions propping up the Assad regime.

Without Russian airpower, Assad would not have been able to flatten Eastern Aleppo, gaining a decisive upper hand at the cost of decimating much of the largest Syrian city.

ASSAD APOLOGISTS on the left have mistakenly characterized the regime as a “socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist” pillar in the Middle East.

“Socialist,” despite the fact that the regime integrated Syria into the neoliberal model [15] and privatized the country until the Assad family owned 60 percent of the wealth of the country, while ordinary Syrians faced the highest levels of poverty and unemployment in the Middle East by 2011.

“Anti-imperialist,” despite the fact that the regime sent troops to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the first Gulf War and participated in the U.S.-led “war on terror” through the extraordinary rendition program by torturing suspected terrorists at black sites in Syria [16].

“Pro-Palestine,” despite the Assad regime’s bombing of the Yarmouk refugee camp [17], once the cultural capital of the Palestinian diaspora in Syria, after implementing a starvation siege that saw the population drop from 150,000 to fewer than 4,000.

While opposing U.S. intervention, we must not fall into the trap of apologizing for other states’ ruling classes [18]. The principle of international solidarity must be the bedrock of genuine opposition to U.S. imperialism. The question is simple. Which side are you on? Assad or the Syrian people resisting his oppressive regime?

As internationalists, we stand with the workers of the world and against the ruling class and their governments in all countries. We demand an end to *all* intervention by imperialist powers, including the U.S. and Russia, and we call on the U.S. to let in any and all refugees looking to flee the carnage.

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P.S.

* May 1, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/05/01/the-left-cant-be-silent-about-assads-crimes>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/syria-war-us-intervention-bombing-trump>

[2] ESSF (article 38819), [The tangled roots of the catastrophe – How was Syria turned into hell on earth?](#)

[3] <https://socialistworker.org/2012/09/20/syrias-revolutionary-resilience>

[4] <https://isreview.org/issue/108/revolution-and-counterrevolution-syria>

[5] https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/human_slaughterhouse.pdf

[6] <https://www.thenational.ae/world/assad-regime-abetted-extremists-to-subvert-peaceful-uprising-says-former-intelligence-official-1.319620>

[7] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/10/11/a-nightmare-in-the-making-for-mosul>

[8] ESSF (article 39915), [Anger: To “leftist” admirers of Assad’s Syria.](#)

[9] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/The_Syrian_Regime_Has_Dropped_Nearly_70%2C000_Barrel_Bombs_en.pdf

- [10] ESSF (article 38818), [A critical test - Anti-imperialism and the Syrian Revolution](#).
- [11] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-airstrikes-against-islamic-state-in-syria/2014/09/22/8b677e26-42b3-11e4-b437-1a7368204804_story.html?utm_term=.a3836179d42e
- [12] <https://socialistworker.org/2018/02/06/turkeys-invasion-will-make-the-suffering-worse>
- [13] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/irans-generals-are-dying-in-syria>
- [14] <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/russia-syria-putin-assad-trump-isis-ghouta/554270/>
- [15] <https://www.thedailybeast.com/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt>
- [16] https://socialistworker.org/2005-1/543/543_05_TortureAir.shtml
- [17] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-yarmouk/assad-steps-up-efforts-to-crush-last-besieged-enclaves-idUSKBN1HQ0Q2>
- [18] <https://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/standing-against-war-and-dictatorship>