

COMMENT

Syria: Standing against both war and dictatorship

Saturday 14 September 2013, by [RUDER Eric](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2013).

Challenging U.S. imperialism shouldn't mean defending repression, writes Eric Ruder.

THE OBAMA administration is engaged in a full-court press to sell a U.S. attack on Syria to a skeptical public. Polls show opposition to a U.S. military strike running at more than 70 percent [\[1\]](#), among Democrats, Republicans and independents alike.

Hoping to shift this popular opposition, Obama plans to make a prime-time speech on Tuesday night to make his case for war, and he and his surrogates are giving interviews to as many news outlets as possible.

The reasons to oppose a U.S. war on Syria are many, which explains the breadth of the opposition among the U.S. public: the lack of credibility of the U.S. acting as the world's policeman given its lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; the devastation and chaos left behind after the U.S./NATO bombing campaign against Libya in 2011; the abject failure of the Obama administration to make a convincing case that a strike on Syria will do anything other than make the situation worse for ordinary Syrians.

But despite this broad opposition, those who made their way to one of the many demonstrations against U.S. intervention in Syria in early September might still have been caught off guard by what they saw: some protesters carrying signs and banners in support of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. In New York City, there were Syrian flags emblazoned with Assad's portrait; in Chicago, protesters had signs with some version of the slogan: "God protect Syria and Bashar al-Assad."

Three socialist organizations in particular—the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), the Workers World Party (WWP) and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), all of which have played a prominent role in the antiwar movement over the years—share this position of support for the Syrian regime, in spite of the mass uprising against it that began during the Arab Spring rebellions of early 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East.

Why would socialists, who on principle should stand with those fighting exploitation and oppression, defend the Assad regime's brutality?

Generally speaking, those who make the argument in defense of Assad insist that any other attitude helps the U.S. make its case for war. After all, U.S. leaders have shown their willingness to distort the evidence to justify the policy they want to pursue anyway—and particularly to use the rhetoric of "humanitarian intervention" to disguise their true war aims [\[2\]](#). So, the argument goes, any additional criticism of the Assad regime at such a time is a capitulation to the U.S. war drive.

But the truth is that these organizations support Assad even when his regime isn't facing imminent

attack by U.S. cruise missiles. What's more, they are arguing for defense of the Syrian regime even as Middle Eastern revolutionaries, in Syria and outside it, call for international solidarity with the struggle to oppose both U.S. intervention and the Assad regime's barbaric violence and repression.

SINCE THE uprising began two and a half years ago, hard on the heels of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt that brought down U.S.-backed dictators, the conflict in Syria has become much more complicated, with foreign powers backing proxy forces in the hopes of influencing the direction of the rebellion. The U.S. is working with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to back various armed groups opposed to Assad, while Russia and Iran are working with Hezbollah and other forces to defend the regime.

So far, more than 100,000 Syrians have died in the fighting, and the Assad government has used merciless repression against entire neighborhoods and regions. There is no iron-clad evidence that the regime was responsible for the chemical weapons attack that killed more than 1,400 people in a Damascus suburb on August 21, but its brutality is well established by its use of heavy weaponry against a civilian population in recent years—and its history of using a “state of emergency” declared in 1963 [3] to clamp down on even the tamest reform efforts.

Lost amid the gunfire are the many revolutionary and popular committees—particularly in cities in northern Syria—made up of ordinary Syrians trying to sustain their challenge to the Assad regime, even as violent forces, both pro- and anti-regime, tear at Syria's social fabric.

But it's the legitimacy of this uprising that the “socialist” defenders of Assad specifically deny.

At one level, this is familiar behavior. Ever since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, these organizations have wanted to pick and choose which uprisings to support based on where they were, instead of seeing them as part of a generalized wave of revolt in the Arab world against poverty, neoliberalism and imperialism. So the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were deemed “legitimate” while support for revolts in Libya and Syria was withheld.

The intervention of the U.S.—which, as always, has worked tirelessly to help the forces of counterrevolution in the region—has provided a cover for groups like the WWP, PSL and FRSO to justify their disregard of bottom-up challenges against authoritarian regimes, as they seize on the fact of U.S. involvement alone to tarnish genuine revolutionary movements.

But if the U.S. has been successful in its perennial strategy of finding regime opponents willing to play ball with Washington's plans—in this case, former members of the Assad regime itself, among other dubious characters—that obviously doesn't discredit everyone fighting for change. In particular, the Local Coordination Committees and other revolutionary currents have a proven record of challenging the regime while remaining independent of imperialist maneuvers.

The ugly consequences of “antiwar” support for the Syrian regime were easy to see in Chicago, where organizers of “Hands off Syria” protests repeatedly turned over the platform to representatives of the Syrian American Forum, which works to coordinate the efforts of regime loyalists in the U.S. Their speakers claim that the Syrian resistance is nothing more than “al-Qaeda terrorists,” that “there is no revolution in Syria, just criminals in the streets,” and that “we should let the Syria government finish up those criminals before it is too late.”

ONE SOURCE of this blind support for Assad is a deeply flawed worldview that identifies socialism with state control over the economy, and nothing more. Not only is this view a gross distortion of the genuine Marxist tradition, which is based on working-class self-emancipation, but it has led many socialist groups over the years to support governments that are obviously and demonstrably opposed

to the goal of giving workers a say over the economy and the distribution of society's wealth.

But the idea is especially farcical with regards to the Assad regime, since Bashar al-Assad is renowned, especially in the world's business press, for his policy of privatization and other neoliberal measures to benefit the oligarchs who dominate the Syrian economy.

Assad's sharp turn toward this economic model in the early 2000s encouraged U.S. foreign policymakers to try to woo him toward the stable of U.S.-friendly regimes in the Middle East. That's why you're seeing pictures of John Kerry and Hillary Clinton dining with the dictator in the not-so-distant past.

Of course, these same economic measures have caused misery for the mass of Syrians. According to Joseph Daher of the Revolutionary Left Current [\[4\]](#):

"These policies, accelerated by the savage repression of any popular or working-class protest since the early 2000s, have had devastating effects. Capital's share of gross domestic product rose to 72 percent in 2005, over a third of the population fell below the poverty line (less than \$1 a day), and nearly half live around this threshold (\$2 or less a day).

Before the revolution, there was between 20 and 25 percent unemployment, reaching 55 percent for under-25s (in a country where people under 30 are 65 percent of the total population). The percentage of Syrians living under the poverty line rose from 11 percent in 2000 to 33 percent in 2010. That is, about 7 million Syrians live around or below the poverty line."

But for the "socialists" who defend the Assad regime, the dynamic of class exploitation upheld by the repressive arm of the Syrian state should be overlooked because the Assad regime is engaged in a confrontation with the U.S.

In the words of FRSO member Joe Iosbaker: "For me, the starting point in looking at the world is this: the main struggle in the world today is between imperialism and the oppressed nations and people."

What this means practically is to ignore any act of violence, no matter how terrible, against the Syrian population; to ignore the silencing of dissent; to ignore neoliberal policies designed to enrich the oligarchs at the expense of the mass of the population—to ignore everything else so long as the regime can be portrayed as an opponent of imperialism.

And what's worse is that the Assad dictatorship isn't even a consistent opponent of imperialism. As Omar s. Dahi and Yasser Munif wrote at *Z Magazine* [\[5\]](#):

"Within the context of Arab authoritarianism, Syria has a unique trajectory. It doesn't follow the diktats of the West in the same way Mubarak's Egypt or Abdullah's Jordan do, but it has never been truly oppositional to the U.S. world order, as it sometimes likes to portray itself. It has been more independent than the U.S. would like and, in an era of total subservience by Syria's Arab brethren, this has seemed radical.

But the main goal for this independence was regime preservation. Its 1976 involvement in the Lebanese war alongside right-wing Christian militias to crush the Palestinian Liberation Organization attests to the Syrian regime's conservative nature. In 1991, Hafiz al-Assad chose to participate in the Gulf War against Iraq while his son's regime participated in extraordinary rendition, torturing Syrian citizens to gather crucial information that could help the U.S. in its "global war on terror."

The timid response of the EU, the U.S., and the general silence by Israel shows that the West considers the Syrian regime a precious asset that can assist in maintaining the current hegemonic structure of power in the region, though their preference may be for it to be weakened and thus more subservient."

THE INTERNATIONAL Socialist Organization, publisher of SocialistWorker.org, has worked, and will continue to work, with all organizations and individuals committed to building an antiwar movement to oppose U.S. imperialism in the Middle East.

But we don't believe we should oppose the Arab Spring in order to oppose U.S. imperialism.

On the contrary, the Arab revolutions have already dealt a major setback to the U.S. by overthrowing two of its favored dictators in the region—Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Thus, seeking to roll back the Arab Spring has been a central goal of the U.S. throughout.

In Syria, that first meant praising Assad as a reformer, even after the rebellion against him was underway. Now the strategy is plainly to push out Assad, but retain all the repressive elements of his regime, not to mention the dominance of a tiny elite over the economy. And if that means deflecting the Syrian revolutions into deadly sectarian divisions, rather than seeing a mass democratic force succeed in toppling Assad, the U.S. has no qualms.

Those who defend the Assad regime are helping the U.S. to achieve one of its aims by backing a dictator who shares the goal of preventing the Arab Spring from coming to Syria. As Yusef Khalil wrote in SocialistWorker.org [6]:

Anti-imperialism is not an excuse to give political cover to a regime that has for decades repressed independent political parties, unions, workers' organizations, and even discussion groups and public gatherings...

Dictatorships and imperialism use one another as alibis to justify the violence they inflict. In fact, the choice between the two has historically guaranteed that we will suffer from both. The antiwar movement cannot oppose American bombs while cheering Assad's bloody crackdown.

The ISO, therefore, opposes U.S. military intervention of any kind in Syria—while also supporting the Arab revolutions, from Cairo to Tunis to Sana'a to Damascus. Any organization worthy of being called socialist should stand for nothing less.

Eric Ruder

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/standing-against-war-and-dictatorship>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/09/politics/syria-poll-main/index.html>

[2] See <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/05/nothing-humanitarian-about-empire>

[3] See on ESSF (article 29746), [Revolts in Syria](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 29598), [Imperialism, sectarianism and Syria's revolution](#).

[5] See on ESSF (article 29746), [Revolts in Syria](#).

[6] See on ESSF (article 29747), [U.S. bombs won't save Syria](#).