

Syria: You can't be antiwar and pro-dictator

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Eric Ruder responds to a left group that has defended its support for a dictator.

THE U.S. antiwar movement is again mobilizing against U.S. military threats to attack a Middle Eastern country: Syria. Though the U.S. and Russia have agreed on a diplomatic process that puts off the immediate prospect of military strikes, the Obama administration continues to insist on its right to carry out such attacks [1].

Today's movement faces a number of new challenges. For one thing, the architect of this drive to war is the Obama administration, not the Bush administration. As a consequence, many Democrats who opposed George Bush's invasion of Iraq are supporting attacks on Syria now, for little more reason than it's Obama at the helm this time [2].

Secondly, there are stark divisions within the antiwar movement about what attitude to take toward the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The International Socialist Organization, the publisher of this website, is one among many groups that have supported the two-and-a-half-year-old mass uprising against Assad and his regime [3]. We see this struggle as part of the Arab Spring—a tide of revolt that has swept North Africa and the Middle East, challenging political tyranny, economic injustice and the dominance of Western imperialism. We stand against intervention by the U.S. and its allies in Syria [4], but at the same time, we continue to defend the revolution against the regime's barbaric violence and repression.

Sadly, other groups claim that opponents of U.S. imperialism must necessarily support the Assad regime. In mid-September, several of these organizations sent representatives to Damascus to meet with Bashar al-Assad himself [5]. In many cities, these forces have tried to stop the rest of the movement from saying anything even faintly critical of the Assad regime's brutality—claiming that such criticism only feeds into the U.S. drive to war.

Last week, in response to my SocialistWorker.org article "Standing against both war and dictatorship," [6] the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) wrote a reply titled "The ISO and the war on Syria: Silly and shameful." [7]

That headline aptly captures the political level of FRSO's critique. The article stoops to insults, unsubstantiated claims about the ISO, and misleadingly selective quotations of my article.

The transparent purpose is to deflect attention from the issues I raised about FRSO, along with the Workers' World Party and Party of Socialism and Liberation—above all, how they can support the Assad regime's use of savage and deadly repression against all opponents, its embrace of free-market neoliberalism and its not-so-hidden collaboration with the U.S., including torturing people "renditioned" to Syria during the "war on terror."

EARLY ON, the FRSO article accuses the ISO of playing the role of “ugly American.” The evidence for this very ugly claim is the following quote from my article: “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...”

The implication is that I didn’t like the Syrian American Forum (SAF) speakers because they were Syrian. But you may have noticed the “...” The rest of my sentence continues: “...which works to coordinate the efforts of [Assad] 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.’”

Maybe FRSO wants to defend these absurd claims against the revolution. But it shouldn’t imply through selective quotation that my suspicions about SAF speakers are merely because they are Syrian.

This is typical of FRSO’s dishonesty. It won’t acknowledge that the SAF is an extension of Assad’s police state—even though the SAF regularly coordinates speaking events around the U.S. for diplomatic representatives of the Syrian regime.

Instead, FRSO is happy to collaborate with SAF and the regime in portraying the Syrian uprising as nothing but “jihadists” armed by pro-U.S. Gulf regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar—because this serves their aim of demonizing any opposition in Syria.

It is true, of course, that allies of the U.S. have funded and armed sectarian militias connected to al-Qaeda and other such groups. But it doesn’t follow that all opposition to the Assad regime is “jihadist”—or embraces the aims of the U.S. and its allies.

There are many tendencies among the forces that are generally called the “rebels.” According to most accounts, including those I trust far above FRSO’s [8], the rebel forces connected in any way to al-Qaeda or al-Nusra are a small minority.

When the Syrian uprising began, opponents of the Assad regime stayed committed to nonviolence for many months, even in the face of an increasingly bloody crackdown by the regime. Fairly quickly—and continuing to this day—in areas of the country liberated from regime control, Local Coordinating Committees sprang up to address the population’s needs and to network with other liberated areas.

The Syrian rebellion is fed by the same sources as the Arab Spring in general—anger at growing inequality as a result of neoliberal economic measures imposed from above, high levels of youth unemployment, poverty among urban workers and rural peasants, and the lack of the most basic democratic rights.

The Assad regime’s response has been barbaric. Though there is no definitive evidence that it has used chemical weapons, there is no doubt that the Syrian military has carried out savage artillery and air assaults against civilian populations, including the bombing of neighborhoods, university campuses and even hospitals. The death toll has now soared above 100,000.

THE U.S. and its allies have also been ruthless—for example, in their backing of Islamist forces such as al-Qaeda and al-Nusra [9], explicitly meant as a counterweight to the popular uprising. Overall, the U.S. and its allies have funneled weapons and other aid away from popular revolutionary forces, even when that meant strengthening Islamist extremists.

As a consequence of the intervention of outside powers such as the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Russia backing various armed factions and the government itself, the growing militarization of Syria's civil war has pushed the forces of the popular revolt further to the margins. But those forces are still struggling to have their voices heard above the guns [10].

The latest round of outside intervention—a “peace deal” brokered by two imperial rivals, Russia and the U.S.—has in fact accelerated the Assad regime's offensive against the civilian population, leading to stepped-up air strikes, shelling and ground attacks on the outskirts of Damascus. Of course, a U.S. military strike would make the situation even worse, further diminishing the space for the popular revolution by giving Assad the excuse to claim that any critic of the regime is a collaborator with foreign forces.

To be sure, some popular forces against Assad, not linked to the U.S. and its allies, are calling for a U.S. attack on the regime's military capabilities. This shouldn't come as a surprise given Assad's murderous use of advanced military hardware against defenseless civilian populations. Under such dire circumstances, even groups that earlier opposed U.S. intervention may hope that a military strike will damage the regime. They may be short-sighted for not recognizing other consequences of an American attack, but they certainly aren't puppets of imperialism merely because they want to see the murderous regime punished.

In any case, U.S. officials have made it quite clear they don't want any popular forces coming to power in Syria, whatever position they may take on military strikes. Veteran military strategist Edward Luttwack, for example, summarized the establishment consensus last month when he made the case for the U.S. to calibrate its military response to produce a “prolonged stalemate” as “the only outcome that would not be damaging to U.S. interests.” [11]

In other words, the U.S. doesn't want either side to win—but to prolong the bloodshed until the popular uprising is buried under the weight of sectarian conflict and the regime's violence.

THE FRSO article claims that the ISO's criticism of the Assad regime and its defenders such as the SAF is “an obstacle to this growing movement against another U.S. war.” But the embrace of Assad by groups like FRSO has already alienated people who want to oppose another U.S. war, but who don't want to be associated with support for dictators.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising two and a half years ago, many Syrians in the U.S. have hesitated to speak in defense of those struggling against the regime for fear that their families back in Syria could be subjected to harassment, imprisonment, torture and worse.

The Assad regime's record of violence and repression is plain—not least of all in its role as a torture subcontractor in the U.S. “war on terror,” as is now widely known. But instead of acknowledging this record, FRSO and other groups like it celebrate the Assad dictatorship as “anti-imperialist”—even “socialist.”

The FRSO reply to my article repeats these absurd claims without even bothering to address the arguments of Omar s. Dahi and Yasser Munif cited in my article:

“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." [12]

No wonder both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her successor John Kerry praised Assad as a "reformer" [13], both before and after the Arab Spring erupted. Their goal, like other U.S. officials, has been to try to draw Syria into closer collaboration with the U.S. in the building of a neoliberal Middle East friendly to oil corporations and the free market.

To be sure, FRSO is no stranger to celebrating autocrats like Assad as heroes of anti-imperialism. It and its co-thinkers supported the regime of Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya [14], the Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un dictatorship in North Korea [15] and the Chinese ruling class' murderous suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising [16].

There are two basic premises behind FRSO's support for these dictators—one, that they represent "socialism" of some sort because of heavy state ownership or involvement in the economy, and two, that they are opposed to imperialism because of their conflicts with the U.S.

Both premises fall apart when you consider any of these examples—and the same is true in the case of Syria. Bashar al-Assad is known for having ruthlessly imposed neoliberalism when he took over for his father in 2000. And both Assads have been willing collaborators with the U.S., as Middle Eastern revolutionaries like Dahi and Munif have shown.

The claim that the Assad regime is "progressive" is especially absurd in the face of the ongoing people's uprising that has defied all the repression the Syrian military has mobilized so far. Indeed, what's truly "shameful" is for "socialists" in the U.S. to oppose a legitimate popular uprising—and demand that impoverished workers in the Middle East abandon their aspirations for a better life.

The antiwar movement should reject the false idea that it must support a dictator in order to oppose imperialism. We should do all we can to mobilize opposition against the drive to attack Syria—while also standing with the many Syrians fighting on their own behalf against exploitation and repression.

Eric Ruder, September 19, 2013

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/19/you-cant-be-antiwar-and-pro-dictator>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/14/barack-obama-syria-chemical-weapons-deal>

[2] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/16/strange-allies-in-a-push-for-war>

[3] See on ESSF (article 28386), [Why the left must support Syria's revolution](#).

- [4] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/05/nothing-humanitarian-about-empire>
- [5] <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2013/09/18/503152.htm>
- [6] See on ESSF (article 29745), [Syria: Standing against both war and dictatorship](#).
- [7] <http://www.fightbacknews.org/2013/9/11/iso-and-war-syria-silly-and-shameful>
- [8] See on ESSF (article 29734), [A Conversation of Yasser Munif: Inside the Syrian Revolution and what the Left must do](#).
- [9] <http://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/syria-the-rise-of-al-qaeda-in-syria-separating-fact-from-mythology/>
- [10] <http://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/syria-the-struggle-continues-syrias-grass-roots-civil-opposition/>
- [11] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/opinion/sunday/in-syria-america-loses-if-either-side-wins.html?_r=0
- [12] See on ESSF (article 29746), [Revolts in Syria](#).
- [13] http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2011/04/28/kerrys_softer_stance_on_syria_scrutinized/
- [14] See on ESSF (article 20657), [Debate in the US left: Taking sides about Libya](#).
- [15] See on ESSF (article 28440), [North Korea: Socialism in one dynasty](#).
- [16] <http://socialistworker.org/2009/07/21/tiananmen-square-debate>