

Analysis & debates: Socialists and wars in the 21st century - The case of Syria

Tuesday 15 November 2016, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2016).

In Syria the rebel cities that rose up five years ago in revolt against the brutal Assad dictatorship are now under a genocidal siege, bombed and assaulted from the air by Assad's military aided and abetted by Russian fighter jets and bombers. Their desperate fight for survival, if unsuccessful, will put paid to the Arab Spring and with it the potential for building a democratic, anti-imperialist governmental alternative in the Middle East for an extended period to come. Socialists and antiwar activists everywhere have every interest in supporting the Syrian people and opposing that war.

But where is the antiwar movement? And what if anything is it doing about Syria? The most recent statement on the Canadian Peace Alliance web site is headlined Stop Bombing Syria. But it is focused on NATO. Not wrong in principle, but the statement, addressed to Canada's previous bombing of ISIS positions in Syria, is many months out of date. There is nothing on the CPA site about the current murderous air and bombing assault on Syria's cities. And it would appear that across the country the movement is doing nothing to protest the war.

Why the silence? Is it only because Trudeau has pulled Canada's fighter jets out of Syria; after all, Canadian planes and troops are active in other parts of the Middle East. The CPA denounces the bombing of Syria by Harper and Trudeau but says nothing about the bombing now by Putin.

And most of the left and labour movement are likewise maintaining a disquieting silence on the war in Syria.

Part of the reason lies no doubt in the complex and confused situation on the ground in that country, and throughout the Middle East.

In Syria the Assad regime has from the outset responded with brutal repression, displaying no willingness to negotiate with the democratic and popular opposition forces. It has sought to deflect attention from its war by various tactics, including the release from its prisons of Islamic fundamentalists who are now fighting with Daesh, the reactionary Islamic State forces that have been drawn into Syria from Iraq as a result of the civil war.

Iran and now Russia have intervened in support of Assad, while traditional allies of the United States (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, with the obvious sympathy of Israel) have backed the opposition, although for their own reactionary purposes and without providing the opposition forces with the weapons and other material support they so desperately need.

The United States, no friend of Assad but fearing his overthrow will further destabilize the Middle East and jeopardize Israel's defense, has doled out aid to the opposition as if through an eye-dropper, denying it the necessary anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons to ward off the regime's bombing of the dissident cities.

And most recently it is the aerial bombardment of those cities by Russia's air force that has saved the Assad regime from what at one point appeared to be imminent collapse. Putin is applying in

Syria the same tactic he deployed against Grozny and the Chechen revolt in the late 1990s, seeking to annihilate the civilian population as a whole in the opposition cities, and not just their armed defenders.

Yet despite the complexity of the geopolitical situation in Syria, antiwar forces in some countries have mobilized in opposition to the current bombing and in solidarity with the democratic and popular opposition forces in Syria.

For example, in Paris, a number of coalitions apparently initiated by Syrian exiles and other Middle Eastern expatriates have demonstrated recently. I append below the statement by one such coalition, in which the far-left Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste is participating.

And in Ottawa recently I chanced upon a group of about 100 demonstrators on Parliament Hill waving Canadian and Syrian flags. Almost all of the demonstrators were Syrian Canadians. The demonstration, I was told by the chief marshal, had been hastily organized within their community to call on the Canadian government to protest the bombing of Aleppo and other cities. The demonstrators' slogans were clear and straightforward: Stop the bombing! End foreign intervention! Trudeau, speak out against Assad's murderous assault!

Yet some on the left are unwilling to join in such demonstrations, even if they acknowledge the need for an antiwar movement. For example, a recent article in *The Bullet* [\[1\]](#), an on-line publication of the Socialist Project, takes issue in particular with "sections of the international left" that seek to build a movement of support to the anti-Assad opposition and opposition to the brutal military assault on it by the regime and its allies, chiefly Putin's Russia. They are confusing "the act of building a solidarity movement with the act of building an antiwar movement," the author charges.

For socialists in the imperialist countries, he says, "the main enemy is at home." In Canada, this means focusing the antiwar movement on Canada's "drive to war" while presumably putting solidarity with the Syrian people and their democratic popular uprising on the back burner. "[P]rioritizing the fight at home," he explains, means that "In Canada, the focus should be on ensuring the Liberals do not re[en]gage with airstrikes in Syria. It also means demanding the [Canadian] troops be withdrawn from the Middle East and from the Ukraine and Eastern Europe, while also advocating for more refugees to be taken in and stopping Canada's escalating arms trade."

In themselves, these are good demands. But isn't there something missing? What about the bombing, and the actually existing war that is taking place today in Syria? Surely we can't remain silent on that.

I sense a reluctance on the part of many activists to condemn Russia's bombings and its alliance with Assad when Russia itself is the target of NATO encirclement and threats of aggression, especially in Eastern Europe. This is understandable. As the *Bullet* author notes, political and economic elites in the "West" are waging a campaign to demonize Russia, reflected in hypocritical attacks on some antiwar organizations for not signing on to that campaign. As he says, we must reject the view that Russia is the main enemy on a global scale. Thus it is logical and correct for him to include the demand for Canadian and NATO troop withdrawals from Ukraine and Eastern Europe among the appropriate demands for the antiwar movement of today.

But does that preclude criticism and denunciation of Russia's bombing and overall counter-revolutionary strategy in Syria? That was the view of one comrade in an email discussion I participated in recently. He expressed his discomfiture at criticism of Russia's conduct in Syria. "Where Russia is concerned," he said, we should instead aim our fire at the U.S. and NATO.

This seems an evasion to me. It is not the U.S. or NATO which are bombing the hell out of Aleppo and other dissident cities, it is Assad and his Russian ally. To be sure, Putin's commitment to maintaining the Assad regime is in part motivated as a response to threatening moves by the U.S. and NATO in other regions, especially eastern Europe. But do such maneuvers oblige us to maintain silence on Russia's atrocities in Syria? (As it happens, in Syria the U.S. has been attempting of late to collaborate with Russia and the Assad regime in efforts to rout its Islamist fundamentalist opponents. There is no reason to think that a Trump presidency will lessen that orientation.)

I think there is a further reason for the reluctance of many on the left to criticize Russia's intervention in Syria. We are still adjusting to the changes in the world situation in the wake of the disintegration of the "socialist bloc" and the end of the Cold War that dominated global geopolitics in the latter half of the 20th century. As Phyllis Bennis points out, [2] in reference to the U.S. antiwar movement,

"we seem unable to sort through the complexity of the multi-layered wars raging across Syria, and unable to respond to our internal divisions to create the kind of powerful movement we need to challenge the escalating conflict.

"It was easier during earlier wars. ... Our job was to oppose US military interventions, and to support anti-colonial, anti-imperialist challenges to those wars and interventions.

"In Vietnam, and later during the Central American wars, that meant we all understood that it was the US side that was wrong, that the proxy armies and militias Washington supported were wrong, and that we wanted US troops and warplanes and Special Forces out. In all those wars, within the core of our movement, many of us not only wanted US troops out but we supported the social program of the other side—we wanted the Vietnamese, led by the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front in the South, to win. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, we wanted US troops and advisers out and also victory for, respectively, the Sandinistas and the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front). In South Africa we wanted an end to US support for apartheid and we also wanted the African National Congress to win.

"The solidarity part got much harder in Afghanistan and especially in the Iraq wars. We stood in solidarity with ordinary Afghans and Iraqis suffering through US sanctions and wars, and some of our organizations built powerful ties with counterparts, such as US Labor Against the War's links with the Iraqi oil workers union. And we recognized the right under international law for an invaded and occupied people to resist. But as to the various militias actually fighting against the United States, there were none we affirmatively supported, no political-military force whose social program we wanted to see victorious. So it was more complicated. Some things remained clear, however—the US war was still wrong and illegal, we still recognized the role of racism and imperialism in those wars, we still demanded that US troops get out.

Now, in Syria, even that is uncertain...."

The left is divided. Some support Bashar al-Assad. "A larger cohort wants to 'win' the war for the Syrian revolution, the description they give to the post-Arab Spring efforts by Syrian activists to continue protesting the regime's repression and working for a more democratic future." [3]

In this regard, I do not endorse Bennis's distinction, in her article cited above, between the "heroic activists who first challenged Damascus in nonviolent protests in 2011 and who continue to try to survive and build civil society amid war and terror," whom she supports, and "the militias doing the actual fighting" in desperate defense of their besieged cities, whom she opposes..]

As to those who see Syria as leading an “arc of resistance” in the Middle East, Bennis makes a telling point: this is

“a claim long debunked by the actual history of the Assad family’s rule. From its 1976 enabling of a murderous attack on the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel al-Zataar in Beirut by right-wing Lebanese backed by Israel, to sending warplanes to join the US coalition bombing Iraq in 1991, to guaranteeing Israel a largely quiet border and quiescent population in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, to its role in interrogating and torturing outsourced US detainees in the “global war on terror,” Syria has never been a consistent anti-imperialist or resistance center.”

The fact is, today’s world differs substantially from that of the Vietnam war. In the 1960s, a military, political and economic bloc led by a dominant imperialist power, the United States, confronted a bloc of states that in one way or another had been torn from the circuits of capital accumulation under Wall Street’s aegis and constituted a vital source of support and even survival for “Third World” liberation movements, as in the case of the Cuban revolution. Today, in the wake of the collapse of the ostensibly “socialist” bloc, we need to pay more attention to the shape of the world that is emerging on a global scale. In a context of declining U.S. hegemony and the emergence of new and nuclear-armed capitalist powers like China and Russia, we must assess what that means for the anti-imperialist fighters of today.

I think it is wrong to approach Syria as just another front in some “new Cold War” between Russia and the U.S. and NATO. Each situation must be assessed in terms of the class forces involved, not some abstract geopolitics that overlooks the interplay of contending imperial interests. In the post-Cold War world, a new era of national and inter-imperialist competition and rivalry, socialists undermine their own credibility if they limit their “anti-imperialism” to denouncing only their “own” imperialism. As Gilbert Achcar argues in the article I cite in note 2, our starting point in this case must be the interests of the Arab revolution, the Arab Spring, and the popular uprising that in Syria erupted almost half a decade ago.

In analyzing these issues, we can draw on the best traditions of the early socialist movement, in particular the internationalist stance taken during the First World War by the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement in Europe: in each of the warring imperialist countries, the socialists had to prioritize opposition to the aggression of their “own” governments and ruling classes, but this antiwar opposition was also an act of supreme solidarity with the antiwar opposition in the opposing “enemy” countries. This approach was exemplified in the Zimmerwald Manifesto, adopted in 1915 at a conference of European socialists. The manifesto was a powerful appeal for “a peace without annexations or war indemnities.” The right of self-determination of peoples, it said, “must be the indestructible principle in the system of national relationships of peoples.”

Some of the Manifesto’s signatories were critical of the Manifesto, however, for failing to link the struggle against war with the struggle for socialism. Lenin, in particular, was insistent that “a revolutionary struggle for socialism is the only way to put an end to the horror of war.” In a pamphlet he drafted on behalf of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, immediately prior to the Zimmerwald conference, Lenin explained that “our attitude towards war is fundamentally different from that of the bourgeois pacifists (supporters and advocates of peace) and of the Anarchists” who were a major influence in the workers movement in many European countries at that time. [4] His thesis is summarized at the very outset of the first chapter [5]:

*“We differ from the former in that we understand the **inevitable connection between wars and the class struggle within a country**; we understand that wars cannot be abolished unless classes are abolished and socialism is created; we also differ in that **we regard civil wars**, i.e., wars waged*

by an oppressed class against the oppressor class, by slaves against slaveholders, by serfs against landowners, and by wage-workers against the bourgeoisie, as fully legitimate, progressive and necessary. We Marxists differ from both pacifists and anarchists in that we deem it necessary to study each war historically” (from the standpoint of Marx’s dialectical materialism) **and separately.** [Emphasis added]

These key propositions were in substance adopted in the program of the Communist International in Lenin’s day. See, for example, the *Theses on the National and Colonial Question adopted at the Second Congress* in 1920. And they served as useful guidelines in assessing the Second World War, a complex combination of five different conflicts: as Ernest Mandel summarized them [6], (1) an inter-imperialist war fought for world hegemony and won by the United States; (2) a just war of self-defence by the Soviet Union against an imperialist attempt to colonize the country and destroy the achievements of the 1917 Revolution; (3) a just war of the Chinese people against imperialism which would develop into a socialist revolution; (4) a just war of the Asian colonial peoples against the various military powers and for national liberation and sovereignty, which in some cases (e.g. Indochina) spilled over into socialist revolution; and (5) a just war of national liberation fought by populations of the occupied countries of Europe, which would grow into socialist revolution (Yugoslavia and Albania) or open civil war (Greece, North Italy).

In my view, this approach is relevant to the present situation in Syria: and in particular, the progressive nature of the Syrian masses’ “civil war” directed against their oppression and repression by the Assad regime and by necessary implication the global imperialist system of which it is a component. This struggle is in essence a class struggle, and its success (and the success of the other democratic uprisings in the Arab Spring) is a precondition to the development and ultimate success of the fight for a socialist Arab East.

The challenge posed to us by the global configuration of forces is huge, there is no denying it. But where peoples are fighting their oppression and imperialist intervention, there is no dichotomy between antiwar resistance and solidarity with the forces on the ground. Nor should our solidarity be determined by whether or to what degree the Canadian state is directly involved.

Yes, in Canada we must direct our fire against the Trudeau government’s aggressive moves against Russia and its present and projected military engagements elsewhere, as in Africa.

But we should have no hesitation in attempting to mobilize solidarity with the Syrian democratic and popular opposition — for an end to the war: for an end to the bombing, withdrawal of all foreign troops (in this case mainly Russian), and emergency provision of massive food, medical and other necessary supplies to the population in the besieged cities.

Richard Fidler

Appendix

The following statement was issued by the Collectif Avec la Révolution Syrienne in advance of a demonstration in Paris November 5 to protest the Assad regime’s siege, supported by Russian fighter jets and bombers, of urban areas in Syria inhabited by civilian opponents of the regime. The full list of members of the collective, which includes about eight organizations including the

Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, available here.

Syrie : les civils toujours sous les bombes

Le 20 octobre 2016, après un mois de massacres de masse organisés par les aviations de Assad et de Poutine, la population d'Alep, profitant d'une trêve de quelques jours est ressortie dans la rue. Et, comme depuis le début de la révolution, en 2011, elle a réaffirmé : « le peuple veut la chute du régime ». Malgré des semaines sous les bombes, elle a rappelé son refus de quitter la ville assiégée et dénoncé la politique de remplacement de population orchestré par Assad dans certaines régions (comme ce fut il y a peu à Darayya, à Moaddamya). Envers et malgré tout, la résistance civile et armée continue à combattre et le régime de Assad et Daech.

Après avoir discuté pendant plus d'un an avec Poutine, dont l'armée massacre les civils dans les zones libérées, nombre de diplomates ont haussé le ton, à l'ONU notamment, lorsque mi-septembre Poutine et Assad ont intensifié les massacres sur Alep. Si l'intensité des bombardements sur Alep aujourd'hui est moindre (provisoirement ?), les bombardements contre les populations civiles dans de nombreuses régions se poursuivent. En outre la partie Est d'Alep comme d'autres régions sont toujours assiégées, et plus de 215 000 prisonniers politiques sont toujours maltraités (et souvent torturés jusqu'à la mort).

Nombre d'yeux sont aujourd'hui rivés sur Mossoul (Irak) et sur Raqqa (Syrie) contrôlées par Daech. La coalition internationale (dont fait partie la France) y intervient avec l'objectif proclamé d'« éradiquer » Daech. Éradiquer Daech en laissant le boucher Assad continuer tranquillement à anéantir le peuple syrien (rappelons que plus de 90 % des civils morts en Syrie, l'ont été sous les coups de Assad et non de Daech) ? Daech s'est développé avec la complicité de Assad et à cause de l'abandon international du peuple syrien que Assad massacre depuis 5 ans dans l'indifférence de beaucoup.

Le meilleur moyen de mettre fin à Daech et au régime d'Assad n'est pas une intervention étrangère mais de soutenir le peuple de Syrie en lutte contre ces deux fléaux. Un peuple qui a montré sa très grande capacité à s'auto-organiser. Mais les gouvernements des puissances régionales et internationales ne veulent surtout pas soutenir un peuple qui réclame le droit à disposer de lui-même, c'est-à-dire à décider lui-même de son avenir, sans qu'on le massacre, que ce soit par un dictateur syrien, par des forces armées russes, iraniennes, irakiennes, par le Hezbollah...

Il faut ainsi continuer à exiger l'arrêt de tous les bombardements dont sont victimes les populations de Syrie, ceux du régime d'abord et de ses alliés russes et iraniens, et aussi ceux de la coalition emmenée par les États-Unis et à laquelle participe la France, lesquels donnent argument aux Russes pour justifier les leurs, et qui renforcent la propagande djihadiste.

Alors que les grandes puissances de ce monde cherchent à imposer, via l'ONU notamment, leur vision de la résolution du conflit en Syrie, seules les forces populaires et démocratiques sont à même d'apporter une solution politique de paix à la situation tragique actuelle. De ce point de vue, il faut soutenir la convergence entre toutes les forces démocratiques, notamment arabes et kurdes, en lutte contre les pouvoirs qui les oppriment en Syrie et dans les pays de la région.

C'est au peuple syrien de décider de son propre avenir et de définir les formes de soutien qui lui semblent nécessaires, soutien que les prétendus « amis de la Syrie » ont totalement dévoyé. Il faut ouvrir les frontières et accueillir dans des conditions décentes les populations qui fuient la guerre.

Position du Collectif Avec la Révolution Syrienne (ARS) : Alternative Libertaire, Cedetim, Émancipation, Ensemble, L'insurgé, NPA, UJFP, Union syndicale Solidaires

Les organisations du collectif Avec la Révolution Syrienne et la Déclaration de Damas pour un changement démocratique, dans leur diversité et avec leur propres analyses, soutiennent la base commune suivante :

Arrêt immédiat de tous les bombardements en Syrie !

Levée immédiate de tous les sièges et libération immédiate de tous les prisonniers politiques !

Départ de la Syrie de toutes les forces armées étrangères !

La revendication du peuple syrien pour le départ de Assad et la fin de son régime, immédiatement et sans condition, est légitime. Elle permettra d'abrégier la souffrance de la population, le retour des réfugiés dans leur pays et de bâtir une Syrie libre et démocratique.

Solidarité avec ce peuple en lutte contre la barbarie de Assad et de ses alliés, contre la barbarie de Daech, pour une alternative démocratique. C'est au peuple syrien et à lui seul de décider de son avenir et des soutiens qui lui semblent nécessaires (dont les armes défensives contre la mort venue du ciel).

Mobilisation internationale pour l'aide humanitaire et l'accueil des réfugiés !

Footnotes

[1] <http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1324.php>

[2] Bennis is director of the Institute for Policy Studies' New Internationalism Project and is the author of Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror: A Primer.

[3] See in particular a valuable article by Gilbert Achcar, "Middle East: Standing Against Barbarism," Jacobin, October 20, 2016. Available on ESSF (article 39287), [Middle East: Standing Against Barbarism](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39287):
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39287>

[4] The pamphlet, entitled "Socialism and War," can be found in V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 21, p. 295 et seq.

[5] Ibid., p. 299.

[6] Ernest Mandel, The Meaning of the Second World War (Verso, 1986), p. 45.