

On Syria and the position of Socialists and progressives

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Given the highly complicated situation in Syria, what should the position of Socialists and progressives be on what is happening there?

The Syrian upheaval reflected the democratic upsurge that took place throughout the Middle East in 2011 and after. These upheavals were for the restoration or establishment of democracy and not for a movement towards socialism despite the fact that economic distress was very much at the heart of these upheavals. Of course this democratic upsurge is to be supported by all progressives and socialists. Regarding Syria, the Assad dynasty (father and son) have been ruling Syria since 1971 and belong to the minority Shia sect of Alawites but remained in power because of support from substantial sections of Sunnis especially in the army. Indeed, until the US invasion of Iraq throughout much of the Middle East (barring the Iran-Saudi Arabia interface), the Shia and Sunni communities were neither sharply divided nor hostile but interacted and intermingled normally and peacefully as many sects within Islam do.

The eruption of a non-violent democratic opposition to Bashar al-Assad (who succeeded his father in 2000) was a very positive development deserving of support from progressives everywhere. It was led by civil society organizations between January and July 2011 but brutal assault by the Assad government forced a small section of the hitherto nonviolent movement to take up armed resistance while defectors from the Syrian army set up the Free Syrian Army (FSA) whose main purpose was not securing democracy but to remove the Assad regime from power. From this time on till the present, a civil war situation emerged with on one hand the decline of the original democratic opposition whose place was basically taken up by all sorts of new actors having different motives and purposes going in for armed conflict against the Assad regime.

In this civil war with multiple actors both within and outside Syria, over 400,000 people have been killed and over 5 million displaced. This conflict no longer has a force or side that one can support because it aims to establish an independent and democratic Syria. Rather, the struggle is now all about regime change or not. At one time various radical Islamist forces (e.g., al-Nusra and ISIL) out to establish their versions of an Islamic state were fighting against Assad and against each other and were gaining ground and backed by outside powers and forces while other external forces and powers were supporting the Assad regime for their own geopolitical purposes.

Today the situation is roughly as follows. The Islamist forces have been basically defeated by on one hand Assad, and on the other by the Kurds of Syria who are connected to the Kurdistan Workers Party which outside of Syria is seen as an enemy by Turkey which rejects Kurdish self-determination. The Assad regime has been supported by Iran and Russia as also by Hezbollah of Lebanon and this back-up has helped Assad to gain control of a little more than half of the country. The FSA and the Kurds were supported by the US (Turkey supported some of the radical Islamists against Assad) which along with Israel sees Iran and Syria under Assad as its main obstacles to greater control over the region. They are also backed by Saudi Arabia which is opposed to Iran. The US also for a time

(till they were defeated) prioritized the fight against radical Islamists, e.g., ISIL, and therefore temporarily eased off on the struggle against Assad. France and Britain have been faithful backers of whatever the US does.

Once the Islamist threat receded and the Kurds became much stronger, Turkey which was held back earlier by both Russia and the US, has now entered the fray to successfully push back the Kurds which has had to concede a large part of the ground they had earlier secured but are still holding on to parts of Syria largely populated by them. Both Russia and the US who value their ties more with Turkey than with the Kurds allowed the former to attack the latter. But the US would not like the Kurds to be totally decimated. As for the recent claim that Assad has used chemical agents in Douma, this was the excuse made for the joint French, British and US air attack on supposed storage and airport facilities – an act that is illegal under international law and must be condemned as such. Where the West says there was the use of chemical weapons, Russia says this was a ‘false flag’ staged affair by opponents of Assad (who may well have their own stocks of chlorine and used it) which gave an excuse to the Western powers to carry out their aerial assault a day before inspectors from the UN’s Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) were to enter Douma. On the face of it, when Assad is advancing territorially (although a very large part of Syrian territory remains out of his control) it would make little political sense for him to carry out such an attack. Also in 2013 Russia persuaded him to allow his stockpile of chemical agents to be destroyed under international supervision. These inspectors have now visited Douma and their report is awaited.

Given this highly complicated situation what should the position of Socialists and progressives be on what is happening in Syria? 1) This civil war was initiated by a brutal and undemocratic Assad regime and there is no question of giving him support earlier, now or later. 2) At the same time once the truly democratic forces were defeated there can be no question of supporting any of the other internal forces opposed to Assad whether radical Islamists or FSA which have nothing to do with seeking or promoting the advance of democracy in Syria. 3) It is one thing to support Kurdish self-determination which is another matter altogether and therefore to oppose the Turkish assault on them; but we cannot support their alliance with the US and the larger Western aim to use them as one pawn among others to unseat the Assad government not because of their concern for the ordinary Syrian people but for their own cynical and imperialist geo-political purposes. 4) Nor should one forget or endorse the Russian role in Syria. 5) In fact the only appropriate position or stand to take is to call for ending the civil war as soon as possible for which there should be a complete arms embargo by all external powers and forces. Instead international pressure should be put for ending the war and for the holding of free and fair elections apart from providing all humanitarian support and aid to the suffering people of Syria and to displaced refugees.

Of course given the way things are, this position is not going to materialise but it is still the only correct position to take. When the US attacked Saddam Hussein in 1991 when he invaded Kuwait, socialists opposed this invasion and also the invasion by the US of Iraq but without thereby supporting Hussein against the US either. Even when we are too weak to change things on the ground we must nevertheless uphold the banner of political integrity and try and generate a wider consciousness of what is the right and democratic path that should be taken. Ours is the long run effort to build a stronger and wider radical and progressive awareness

There is also a broader question that the earlier invasions of Iraq, what is happening in Syria and what many other struggles in which external forces intervene raises – under what circumstances if any should progressives and socialists defend or oppose external military interventions? What follows below is a general theoretico-political discussion on this crucial issue of what is called “Humanitarian Intervention”

Three Positions

There is non-forcible humanitarian intervention and forcible (military) intervention in the name of protecting human rights. About non-forcible humanitarian intervention, usually (but not always) by non-state actors there is generally not much of a problem although it can certainly be opposed by target state in the name of national sovereignty and external non-interference. The main problem is how to deal with the issue of forcible (military) humanitarian intervention which is qualitatively different from even supplying arms to a favoured side (e.g. progressive revolutionaries in a civil war situation) in a country. Of course if one is a practitioner of realpolitik (your standard so-called strategic or foreign affairs 'expert') then one can simply say that whatever is in the interest of the state (that favourite phrase that covers a multitude of sins, namely "national interest") should be done and to hell with normative, legal or moral considerations. However, even these realpolitikers invariably try to cover up their actions and claims in legal and moral disguises.

A. Such a form of intervention is a breach of the principle of state sovereignty and national self-determination as the supreme legal principle embodied in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter makes clear. [It should be noted here that the single greatest global democratic advance of at least the second half of the 20th century if not of the whole of that century was de-colonization even when a local dictator replaced external colonial-dictatorial rule!]. The only exceptions allowed to this are (i) the "right to self-defence" in Article 2(4) of the same UN Charter where there is an attack by the official armed forces of another state and not just by unofficial 'insurgents'. (ii) When the Security Council (SC) as a 'last resort' (when all other efforts have failed) sanctions armed action in the case of a "breach of international peace". Apart from this there is no dispute that any forcible intervention would be a violation of international law. The issue is whether this would be justified or not.

The five main objections to any such external armed action are the following: (i) There is issue of motives — states don't intervene for humanitarian reasons. (ii) Sovereignty is supreme and therefore there can be no such intervention. Citizens are the exclusive responsibility of their state and their state i.e., entirely their business. (iii) Don't promote further possibility and likelihood of abuse by adding another 'exception' in the name of human rights to what already exists by way of exceptions. (iv) There will always be selective applications of the principle of forcible humanitarian intervention and thus there will always be inconsistency in this policy promoting its abuse. (v) There is no agreed consensus among the states of the world on what should be the principles on which forcible humanitarian intervention would be justified. It is better for the world that the order currently provided by upholding the principle of non-intervention that already legally exists is far better than allowing international disorder that would result from accepting periodic violations of this principle in the name of human rights.

B. Those who argue for forcible humanitarian intervention insists (i) that promotion of human rights is at least as important, if not more so, than international peace and security. Articles 1(3), 55 and 56 of the UN Charter are put forward as being as, or more important than Article 2(4) though legally such a view is untenable. (ii) Whatever the legal position, this is not the same as the moral position. Morality may require in certain cases forcible humanitarian intervention to end slaughter. The existence of a legal right enables action but does not determine it. (iii) It is outcomes not motives that are most important. Also outcomes are shorter/immediate and longer-term. The short-term considerations are met by intervention to stop the human suffering but some decision-makers and decision-shapers including liberal scholars, insist on meeting what they call "justice in endings". So even if it was wrong for the US to invade Iraq in 2003 once having done so they must now stay on to ensure proper economic, social, political reconstruction. How long they should stay and what constitutes adequate reconstruction will of course be decided by the intervener!

C. There is also a 'qualified intervention position' which states that for the most part humanitarian intervention is not justified because one must respect the right of a people [where peoples are constituted as separate nations] to overthrow their own tyrant. That is to say, the suffering people must themselves be seen as the primary agency of their own future. Their agency cannot be substituted for by an external agency. This is why the overthrow of British colonial rule must be by the colonized people themselves and not by an external invasion from another country. Similarly the struggle against apartheid must be fought above all by the victims of apartheid. Or the overthrow of the Shah of Iran or any another domestic tyrant must be by the people of that state themselves. Of course there can be external help in this effort but not military invasion to overthrow the domestic oppressor.

The only qualifications to this are (i) when the situation is so grave that the very existence of the 'people' in question is threatened. After all, to respect a people's right to overthrow their own tyrant must presume that the people's existence is not threatened. Expulsion of a people (one form of ethnic cleansing) or even killings on a very large scale but which do not threaten the very existence of the affected population in whole or substantial part, do not qualify as justifications for external military intervention. Unfortunately the UN definition of 'genocide' is so loose and vague that it does not help because it allows for the killing of hundreds or a few thousands to be considered or called a 'genocide' as well as being applied to a much larger scale of massacres that should be seen as threatening the existence of a people. The question of proportionately of killings in relation to the total population does come in. When this is being threatened then outcomes do matter more than motives and there should be intervention from the outside to stop this. In the case of East Timor in 1975 when the Indonesian government got a green light from the US to invade it did so and killed more than one-third of the total population of 800,000 East Timorese. Similarly in Rwanda in 1994 there was the wholesale massacre of Tutsis and even when the UN peace-keeping force headed by Romeo Dallaire called for a massive influx of UN troops to prevent this, it was prevented because the Western powers led by the US were not strategically interested in the region but wanted UN sanction for military action against Serbian presence in Bosnia. One region where an external military action did take place which was justified was the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea to finally defeat the Pol Pot regime (backed by both the US and China) in 1978. The motive may have been to end the cross-border conflict between the two countries but the outcome was an end to a regime that had killed between a third and a half of the Kampuchean population. This invasion was decried by the West and its allies when it should have been applauded.

(ii) The second qualification where an external military intervention is justified is when in a civil war situation another country first invades directly to support a regressive rebel side against the legitimate ruling government. This happened in Angola (1975) and in Mozambique (1987) when the Apartheid regime of South Africa sent in its troops to help local rebel groups to overthrow respectively the MPLA (Movement for the Liberation of Angola) government which had come to power by throwing out the Portuguese colonialists in Angola; and then again there was the South African Apartheid government's troop support to a rebel force seeking to overthrow FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) which had also come to power by throwing out Portuguese colonial rule. In both cases — in an example still unparalleled of genuine proletarian internationalism — Cuba sent in its troops to defeat those of Apartheid South Africa.

This third position is the best political guideline we have and one I believe revolutionary Marxists should uphold.

There are those like Noam Chomsky who say that only if there is a genuine international force and not one suborned like the UN forces to manipulation by the great powers can we talk of and justify external humanitarian intervention. But even if such a force did exist (which is not the case) here too, the principle of respecting the agency of a people to overthrow their own tyrant holds.

P.S.

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