# Anti-imperialism and the Syrian Revolution

written by Ashley Smith | August 28, 2016

The Syrian Revolution has tested the left internationally by posing a blunt question: Which side are you on? Do you support the popular struggle against dictatorship and for democracy? Or are you with Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime, his imperial backer Russia, his regional ally Iran and Iran's proxies like Hezbollah from Lebanon?

Tragically, too many have failed this test.

From the very beginning of Syria's revolution–even before the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda's Nusra Front some years later–a whole section of the left opposed the popular uprising against the Assad dictatorship that began in early 2011, part of the Arab Spring wave of popular rebellions against dictatorship and repression.

Since then, they have turned a blind eye to Assad's massacre of some 400,000 Syrians, and his regime's use of barrel bombs, chemical weapons and barbaric sieges of cities like Aleppo. Today, 11 million people–half the country's population–have been displaced, with the Assad regime responsible for the lion's share of the death and destruction.

The U.S. has been seeking a resolution that might push Assad aside, but that above all maintains his regime in power, preferably with representation from reliable pro-Washington figures associated with the uprising.

Barack Obama came under pressure to intervene militarily in Syria after the regime carried out a chemical weapons attack in a suburb of Damascus in 2013, but he backed a Russian-brokered resolution that protected Assad.

His administration has hoped to use figures on the rebel side to provide a new face for Syria's dictatorship. But Assad held on–thanks in no small measure to the fact that the U.S., while accepting some supplying of the rebels, denied these forces the heavy weaponry they pleaded for to stop the regime's assault.

The result today is that the Obama administration has struck a de facto alliance with Russia to wage the war on ISIS, with the acknowledged consequence that even the Syrian regime's hated figurehead will likely stay in place, while those who rose up for democracy and justice continue to bear the brunt of the violence.

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EVEN IN the early stages of the Syrian uprising, when it was plainly following the inspiration of the popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, Stalinist groups like the Workers World Party, Party for Socialism and Liberation, and Freedom Road Socialist Organization never wavered in their support for the Assad regime. They have always preached uncritical support for opponents (perceived or real) of the U.S. government, no matter how oppressive and reactionary.

But they weren't alone. Prominent figures on the broader left adopted a similar position.

Journalists Patrick Cockburn and Robert Fisk erase the anti-Assad revolution in their coverage of Syria and present the situation as a geopolitical conflict–between the U.S. and its proxies on one side, and Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies on the other.

Even important antiwar formations like Britain's Stop the War coalition have adapted to Assad supporters, giving a platform to allies of the dictatorship, while denying the same to supporters of the revolution. For example, Stop the War toured regime apologist Mother Superior Agnès Mariam de la Croix, despite an open letter protesting this decision signed by dozens of Syria solidarity activists.

In the U.S., the small antiwar formation United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) staged a demonstration that included people carrying the flag of Assad's regime–some even wore T-shirts emblazoned with the dictator's face.

The American Communist Party's U.S. Peace Council went so far as to send a delegation that met with Assad and his henchmen. They justified their sympathy with Assad by claiming that he was resisting U.S. imperialism's backing of Islamic fundamentalist forces to carry out regime change in Syria.

"Most of Syrian society [has] unified behind the state to protect a secular Syria against the divided and sectarian result the U.S. and its nefarious allies have been working and killing to generate," wrote Henry Lowendorf about his visit with Assad in a post that circulated on the United for Peace and Justice e-mail list. "Syria has what is apparently a national unity government, focused during the crisis on fighting off the vicious mercenaries of most powerful country in the world and its allies."

This is a complete distortion of reality that is used to justify standing on the side of dictatorship, counterrevolution and imperialist intervention. The pro-Assadists are discrediting the left in the eyes of Syrians who have fought heroically on the side of the revolution.

A genuine internationalist left must stand with Syria's popular resistance to Assad, which began as a nonviolent uprising against the dictatorship–and against intervention by American and Russian imperialism, as well as by the region's main powers.

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HOW COULD opponents of U.S. imperialism end up supporting a dictator–one who has been known to *collaborate* with the U.S. in torturing "war-on-terror" prisoners in the CIA's extraordinary rendition program.

The answer starts with the Stalinist left's support of Stalin's Russia and Mao's China during the Cold War era. It supported those state capitalist dictatorships not only as opponents of U.S. imperialism, but as positive models of socialism.

Thus, some of the same currents that today support Assad yesterday defended murderous repression of workers' rebellions and even imperialist invasions in the past.

They stood with Russia's crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring in 1968 and Poland's Solidarity in 1981. They supported Mao's China when the regime wrecked workers and peasants' lives through the Great Leap Forward and oppressed Tibetans in a decades-long occupation. They defended regimes like Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe as anti-imperialist, despite his relentless crackdown on all dissent.

Even today, when all the world's states are obviously capitalist, these leftists support oppressive regimes as "anti-imperialist" so long as they oppose the U.S. in some form. Under the faulty logic that "my enemy's enemy is my friend," popular struggles for democracy are denounced as the work of American imperialism if they protest the wrong regime.

This attitude, referred to as "campism," has distorted much of the left's response to popular uprisings in the Middle East. For example, Iran's "green movement" was dismissed as a creation of the U.S. drive to overthrow former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

As a consequence of this flawed underlying approach, the campist left reacted to the Arab Spring in a completely incoherent fashion.

Everyone on the left supported the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions of early 2011 because these countries were considered U.S. allies. But the campists opposed pro-democracy uprisings in Libya and Syria, even though these revolts were driven by the same economic and political grievances–and clearly inspired by the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt.

Why? Because the dictatorships that masses of people were rebelling against could be depicted as "anti-imperialist" opponents of the U.S.

In reality, both the Libyan and Syrian regimes had been "frenemies" of Western imperialism–sometimes collaborating with and at other times dissenting from the designs of the U.S. government and its European allies. And both regimes were happy to work with Russian and Chinese imperialism. In no way can they be accurately categorized as "anti-imperialist."

Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi curried favor with Europe by acting as a border patrol for the EU, stopping North Africans from crossing the Mediterranean Sea and imprisoning large numbers of them in his country's gulag.

As for Assad in Syria, his dictator father joined the first "coalition of nations" for the U.S.-led Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991. Bashar al-Assad got his chance to collaborate with a Bush during the "war on terror" years after 2001, when prisoners of war were smuggled into Syrian jails to be tortured for information and then returned to U.S. custody.

At one point, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went so far as to call Assad a "reformer" worthy of engagement.

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THE CAMPIST left's attitude is based, to at least some degree, on a misreading of the structure of today's world order and America's position in it. They presume that there is only one imperialist power in the world–the U.S.–and that it is an all-powerful manipulator of international events.

The U.S. does remain the world's dominant imperialist power, but as a result of its failed war in Iraq and other factors, it has suffered a relative decline in strength. Washington is now challenged internationally by imperialist rivals like China and Russia, as well as regional powers. In this new imperial order, the U.S. is less capable of controlling world events–it fears popular revolt all the

more.

The campist misreadings, however, have led them to the conclusion that the U.S. government is pulling the strings in the rebellion in Syria. Some have gone so far as to argue–absurdly–that the U.S. backs ISIS against Assad. Ironically, this puts the campists in agreement with Donald Trump, who, in his latest ravings, claims that Obama and Clinton were "founders" of ISIS.

Leaving everything else aside, such arguments display an arrogant dismissal–not unlike*defenders* of imperialism–of the capacity of exploited and oppressed people to fight for liberation. Instead, we get a classic Orientalist trope: Western imperialism manipulating the ignorant and reactionary local tribes for its own purposes.

In reality, the U.S. retreated in general from outright regime change as its strategy in the Middle East after the failure of its invasion and occupation of Iraq. The main priority behind the alternative direction for U.S. imperialism pursued by Barack Obama is that the U.S. should avoid destabilizing regimes for fear of the chaos that ensues in the aftermath.

Thus, the voices of the campist left are stuck in the past, trying to find the evidence to expose a strategy of regime change that the U.S. has abandoned.

The rebranding of U.S. imperialism under Obama left its mark on Washington's response to the Arab Spring.

The first instinct was to rally to the defense of the old regime–as Hosni Mubarak's police were killing protesters, Secretary of State Clinton praised the government for "demonstrating restraint." But when that became untenable, Washington pressed for a policy of orderly transition, sacrificing dictators in order to save the existing state apparatus.

After the first tide of the revolt receded, the U.S. was all too happy to support the reassertion of the old order–as when Washington's ally Saudi Arabia sent troops to crush an uprising in Bahrain. And now, after the rise of ISIS, chiefly as a consequence of the disastrous occupation of Iraq, the U.S. is solely and obsessively focused on defeating this counterrevolutionary force in Iraq and Syria.

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IN SYRIA, however, Washington's goal is obvious, and has been for some time: It doesn't want regime change. Perhaps the hated figurehead of Assad will be pushed aside, but U.S. policy from the beginning has been to preserve the core of Assad's state.

Why? Above all, the U.S. fears an unpredictable outcome, whether as a result of the advance of the Nusra Front or ISIS–but especially in the form of a popular revolution.

Anyone who doubts the popular nature of the Syrian Revolution should read Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami's stirring account of it in their book Burning Country–or for a shorter online description, Mark Boothroyd's article "Self Organization in the Syrian Revolution." This is a struggle from below that imperialism has always feared the most.

In its initial stages, the uprising in Syria had a nonviolent and mass character, but the savage repression and violence carried out by the regime militarized the conflict. The U.S. blocked the shipment of heavy weaponry, such as anti-aircraft systems, that would have strengthened secular and democratic forces that have borne the brunt of the Assad regime's terror.

The net effect of U.S. policy was to assist in the marginalization of anti-Assad forces committed to

the democratic goals of the uprising from its beginning–and to provide an opening for the predominance of reactionary jihadist military forces like Nusra or ISIS.

Perversely, Assad himself sought to cultivate these fundamentalist currents by releasing hundreds of jihadists from prison while jailing and torturing the leaders of the popular uprising. Assad rightly understood that the reactionaries could be used to crowd out popular forces, uprising and would be an easier opponent to defeat.

Today, Washington's goals are to wipe out ISIS and to secure a negotiated settlement in Syria that preserves the regime, if not Assad himself. In America's camp, regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have tried to push the envelope even further, backing various jihadist forces to strengthen their position in region and weaken their opponents, from Assad to Iran, as well as challengers from below such as the Kurds.

On the other side of the international geopolitical rivalry, Russia–profoundly weakened since its defeat in the Cold War a quarter century ago–is reasserting its imperial power through its all-out support for the Assad regime in Syria.

Russia wants to secure its position as a power broker in the region, push back against the U.S. and maintain a base in Syria. For its part, the Iranian government wants to stop Assad from being toppled for fear of losing a valuable ally in the region. And Assad is eager to manipulate all of the above to preserve his dictatorship.

While each of these players has different interests, they overlap in ways that confound the campist left's flawed analysis.

For example, the U.S., Russia and Assad are in a de facto collaboration in the war against ISIS. Thus, Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry is pursuing a cooperation pact with Russia that would cement a counterrevolutionary peace based on preserving the existing state.

However, Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria has been successful enough that Assad may be able to block demands for a transition that sidelines him. With at least a section of the U.S. foreign policy establishment willing to support a resolution that leaves Assad intact, it's quite plausible that Washington could bless such an outcome, creating yet another awkward point of agreement between campists and the U.S. imperialists they deplore.

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UNFORTUNATELY, CAMPISM has shaped the viewpoint of whole sections of the left–even parts that are far removed from the Stalinism of the Workers World Party. It has, for example, informed the attitudes of Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and especially her vice presidential running mate Ajamu Baraka.

Stein rightly opposes U.S. intervention in Syria, but has made little to no criticism of Assad and his war on the Syrian people. Even worse, Baraka openly supports the Assad regime. Both have appeared on Russia's state-sponsored, English-language RT television network to speak in opposition to U.S. war crimes, while remaining silent about Putin's and Assad's atrocities.

Many Syrian revolutionaries and solidarity activists are rightly furious about this stance from the major left-wing alternative in Election 2016. Stein and Baraka each have proud records of standing against exploitation, oppression, racism and war, and their campaign is, in almost every other respect, a principled challenge to the two parties of capital and militarism–the Democrats and Republicans. But anti-imperialists must not stay silent about this awful exception.

Certainly, the candidates of the two capitalist parties have no alternative on Syria, let alone any other question.

Donald Trump is a racist bigot who wants to bar Muslims from the U.S. and supports Assad's regime as a lesser evil to ISIS.

But Hillary Clinton is no ally of the Syrian people. She calls for the U.S. to enforce a no-fly zone in Syria, and some of her advisers support air strikes against the Assad regime for the stated aiming of stopping attacks on civilians. But Clinton certainly does not support the original aspirations of the Syrian Revolution.

At most, Clinton supports another strategy to achieve the same aim her former boss, Barack Obama, advocates: a negotiated solution that preserves the core of the Syrian state, preferably with Assad out of power, but possibly with him remaining.

No one committed to solidarity with the Syrian struggle can align themselves with either wing of the U.S. imperial establishment. Instead, the left must reject imperialism in any form, including Russia's.

Rather than look to imperialist powers or dictatorial regimes in either camp, the left should stand for workers' struggle across borders and in defense of oppressed nations and their fight for self-determination.

In Syria, the revolution has suffered a defeat for the time being. While civil society activists continue to seize every opportunity to assert their goals, their forces have been ravaged by counterrevolution–in the form of the Syria regime and its international allies on the one hand, and the Nusra Front and ISIS, which was particularly eager from the start to target the rebels than regime forces, on the other.

But as Gilbert Achcar argues in his book *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, this setback, however devastating, comes amid a long period of revolutionary crisis in Syria and the whole region.

The task of the international left today is to oppose intervention by any of the imperialist and regional powers, reject the tyranny of the Assad regime itself, demand the opening of the borders to those fleeing the violence and chaos, collaborate with Syrian revolutionaries–and win people away from campism to the politics of international solidarity from below.

*Originally posted here.*