

Erasing People through Disinformation: Syria and the “Anti-Imperialism” of Fools

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Disreputable writers and outlets, often operating under the aegis of “independent journalism” with purportedly “leftwing” views, are spreading corrosive propaganda and disinformation that aims to strip Syrians of political agency

[The following Open Letter was a collaborative effort of a group of Syrian writers and intellectuals and others who stand in solidarity with them. It is signed by activists, writers, artists, and academics from Syria and more than forty other countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, Oceania, and South America, and appears in multiple languages: English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Russian, and Portuguese.]

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising ten years ago, and especially since Russia intervened in Syria on behalf of Bashar al-Assad, there has been a curious and malign development: the emergence of pro-Assad allegiances in the name of “anti-imperialism” among some who otherwise generally identify as progressive or “left,” and the consequent spread of manipulative disinformation that routinely deflects attention away from the well-documented abuses of Assad and his allies. Portraying themselves as “opponents” of imperialism, they routinely exhibit a highly selective attention to matters of “intervention” and human rights violations that often aligns with the governments of Russia and China; those who disagree with their highly-policed views are frequently (and falsely) branded as “regime change enthusiasts” or dupes of western political interests.

The divisive and sectarianizing role played by this group is unmistakable: in their simplistic view, all pro-democracy and pro-dignity movements that go against Russian or Chinese state interests are routinely portrayed as the top-down work of Western interference: none are autochthonous, none are of a piece with decades of independent domestic struggle against brutal dictatorship (as in Syria), and none truly represent the desires of people demanding the right to lives of dignity rather than oppression and abuse. What unites them is a refusal to contend with the crimes of the Assad regime, or even to acknowledge that a brutally repressed popular uprising against Assad took place.

These writers and outlets have mushroomed in recent years, and have often positioned Syria at the forefront of their criticisms of imperialism and interventionism, which they characteristically restrict

to the west; Russian and Iranian involvement is generally ignored. In doing so, they have sought to align themselves with a long and venerable tradition of internal domestic opposition to the abuses of imperial power abroad, not only but quite often issuing from the left.

But they do not rightfully belong in that company. No one who explicitly or implicitly aligns themselves with the malignant Assad government does. No one who selectively and opportunistically deploys charges of “imperialism” for reasons of their particular version of “left” politics rather than opposing it consistently in principle across the globe — thereby acknowledging the imperialist interventionism of Russia, Iran, and China — does.

Often under the guise of practicing “independent journalism,” these various writers and outlets have functioned as chief sources of misinformation and propaganda about the ongoing global disaster that Syria has become. Their reactionary, inverted Realpolitik is as fixated on top-down, anti-democratic “power politics” as that of Henry Kissinger or Samuel Huntington, just with the valence reversed. But this maddeningly oversimplifying rhetorical move (“flipping the script” as one of them once put it), as appealing as it might be to those eager to identify who the “good guys” and “bad guys” are at any given place on the planet, is really an instrument of tailored flattery for their audiences about the “true workings of power” that serves to reinforce a dysfunctional status quo and impede the development of a truly progressive and international approach to global politics, one that we so desperately need, given the planetary challenges of responding to global warming.

The evidence that US power has itself been appallingly destructive, especially during the Cold War, is overwhelming: all across the globe, from Vietnam to Indonesia to Iran to Congo to South and Central America and beyond, the record of massive human rights abuses accumulated in the name of fighting Communism is clear. And in the post-Cold War period of the so-called “War on Terror,” American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have done nothing to suggest a fundamental national change of heart.

But, America is not central to what has happened in Syria, despite what these people claim. The idea that it somehow is, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, is a by-product of a provincial political culture which insists on both the centrality of US power globally as well as the imperialist right to identify who the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are in any given context.

The ideological alignment of rightwing admirers of Assad with this kind of authoritarian-friendly “leftism” is symptomatic of this, and indicates that the very real and very serious problem lies elsewhere: what to do when a people is as abused by their government as the Syrian people have been, held captive by those who think nothing of torturing, disappearing, and murdering people for even the slightest hint of political opposition to their authority? As many countries move closer and closer to authoritarianism and away from democracy, this seems to us a profoundly urgent political question to which there is yet no answer; and because there is no answer, all across the globe there is growing impunity on the part of the powerful, and growing vulnerability for the powerless.

About this, these “anti-imperialists” have no helpful words. About the profound political violence visited upon the Syrian people by the Assads, the Iranians, the Russians? No words. Forgive us for pointing out that such erasure of Syrian lives and experiences embodies the very essence of imperialist (and racist) privilege. These writers and bloggers have shown no awareness of the Syrians, including signatories to this letter, who risked their lives opposing the regime, who have been incarcerated in the Assads’ torture prisons (some for many years), lost loved ones, had friends and family forcibly disappeared, fled their country - even though many Syrians have been writing and speaking about these experiences for many years.

Collectively, Syrian experiences from the Revolution to the present pose a fundamental challenge to

the world as it appears to these people. Syrians who directly opposed the Assad regime, often at great cost, did not do so because of some Western imperialist plot, but because decades of abuse, brutality, and corruption were and remain intolerable. To insist otherwise, and support Assad, is to attempt to strip Syrians of all political agency and endorse the Assads' longstanding policy of domestic politicicide, which has deprived Syrians of any meaningful say in their government and circumstances.

We Syrians and supporters of the Syrian people's struggle for democracy and human rights take these attempts to "disappear" Syrians from the world of politics, solidarity, and partnership as quite consistent with the character of the regimes these people so evidently admire. This is the "anti-imperialism" and "leftism" of the unprincipled, of the lazy, and of fools, and only reinforces the dysfunctional international gridlock exhibited in the UN Security Council. We hope that readers of this piece will join us in opposing it.

Signatories [Affiliations for identification purposes only]

Syrians

Ahmad Aisha, journalist and translator (Turkey)

Ali Akil, Founder & Spokesperson, Syrian Solidarity New Zealand (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Amina Masri, Activist/Educator (USA)

Amr al-Azam, Professor of Middle East History and Anthropology, Shawnee State University (USA)

Asmae Dachan, Syrian-Italian Journalist (Italy)

Ayaat Yassin-Kassab, Student, University of Oxford (UK)

Aziz Al-Azmeh, University Professor Emeritus, Central European University (Austria)

Bakr Sidki, translator and columnist (Turkey)

Banah el Ghadbanah, University of California, San Diego (USA)

Bisher Ghazal-Aswad, Doctor, NHS (UK)

Bushra A., Syria Solidarity New York City (USA)

Dellair Yousef, writer and director, Berlin (Germany)

Dr. Mohammed Zaher Sahloul, President, MedGlobal & Founder, American Relief Coalition for Syria (USA)

Faraj Bayrakdar, poet (Sweden)

Farouk Mardam-Bey, publisher and writer, Paris (France)

Fouad M. Fouad, Professor, American University of Beirut (Lebanon)

Fouad Roueiha, Activist (Italy)

Ghayath Almadhoun, poet (Germany)

Haian Dukhan, Associate Research Fellow, Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St. Andrews (UK)

Haid Haid, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House (UK)

Hala Alabdalla, Filmmaker (France)

Hassan Nifi, writer (Turkey)

Irène Labeyrie Chaya, Architect & Former Teacher at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Qalamun, Deir Atiya, Syria

Joseph Daher, Syrian/Swiss Academic, University of Lausanne/European University Institute (Switzerland)

Karam Nachar, academic and writer

Karam Shaar, Senior Analyst, New Zealand Treasury (New Zealand)

Karim Al-Afnan, Journalist (UK)

Lara el Kateb, Member of the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists

Leila Al-Shami, Writer/Activist (Scotland)

Lubayed Aljundi, PhD Candidate, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Mahmoud el Wahb, writer (Turkey)

Marcelle Shehwaro, New York NY (USA)

Marcus Halaby, British-Syrian Writer and Labour Party Member (UK)

Marwa Daoudy, Associate Professor, Georgetown University (USA)

Mayson Almisri, Syria Civil Defence - White Helmets, co-winner of the Gandhi Peace Award 2021 (Canada)

Miream Salameh, Syrian Artist (Australia)

Mohamed Al Rashi, Actor (France)

Mohamed Samawi, Homs, PR

Mohamed T. Khairullah, Mayor, Borough of Prospect Park, New Jersey (USA)

Mohammad Al Attar, Writer, Playwright, Berlin (Germany)

Mohja Kahf, Professor (USA)

Najwa Affash, President of the Hani Association, Paris (France)

Nidal Betare, Journalist (USA)

Nisrine Al Zahre, academic and writer (France)

Noor Ghazal Aswad, Doctoral Candidate, University of Memphis (USA)

Odai Al Zoubi, Writer (Sweden)

Omar Abbas, University of California Riverside (USA)

Omar Qaddour, novelist and journalist (France)

Orwa Khalifa, writer (Turkey)

Osama Alomar, Writer (USA)

Rahaf Aldoughli, Lecturer in Middle East and North Africa Studies, Lancaster University (UK)

Ramah Kudaimi, organizer, Washington (USA)

Ramzi Choukair, Actor and Director, Kawalisse Theatre Company (France)

Sadek Abd Alrahman, writer (Turkey)

Salam Abbara, Doctor and Activist, Paris (France)

Salam Said, Academic (Germany)

Saleem Albeik, Writer/Journalist, Palestinian/Syrian (France)

Samar Yazbek, novelist (France)

Sami Haddad, Activist (Italy)

Sherifa Zuhur

Shiyam Galyon, War Resisters League (USA)

Taha Bali, physician and writer (USA)

Touhama Ma'roof, dentist (Turkey)

Victorios Bayan Shams, Journalist (Brazil)

Wael Khouli, Physician Executive - B E Smith, Michigan (USA)

Yasmine Merei, Writer & Journalist and Head of Women for Common Space, Berlin (Germany)

Yasser Khanger, Poet from the occupied Golan

Yasser Munif, Emerson College (USA)

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Writer, Former Political Prisoner (Germany)

Yassin Swehat, Journalist and Editor (Germany-Spain)

Yazan Badran, PhD student, Vrije Universiteit and SyriaUntold (Belgium)

Others

A Hak (UK)

Abdelrahman Elbanna, Lyndhurst, NJ (USA)

Abdullsh Hayed, Paris (France)

Abdulrahman Hallak, Kuwait (Kuwait)

Abdul-Wahab Kayyali, Researcher, Princeton University (Canada)

abraham Weizfeld PhD, Direct Democracy Movement

Adam Sabra, Professor of History, University of California, Santa Barbara (USA)

Adam Shatz, Writer, Brooklyn (USA)

Aditya Sarkar, University of Warwick (UK)

Adnan Salim, Ido Madrid (Spain)

Agnes Favier, Part Time Professor, European University Institute

Agostino Soldini, trade union secretary (Switzerland)

Ahlam Zeineddine, Beirut (Lebanon)

Ahmad Matar, chef (Palestinian, Germany)

Ahmed Sakkal, Baltimore, MD (USA)

Aidan Geboers, Financial Professional (UK)

Akram Aboud, Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)

Al Hammood, Centreville, VA (USA)

Alan Wald, H. Chandler Davis Collegiate Professor Emeritus, University of Michigan (USA)

Alberto Savioli, archaeologist and writer

Aldo Cordeiro Sauda, Editora Contrabando, São Paulo (Brazil)

Aldo Garzia, journalist (Italy)

Alessandra Mezzadri, Senior Lecturer, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Alessia Bleve, Social Space Zei Aps - Circolo arci Lecce (Italy)

Alex De Jong, Co-Director, International Institute for Research and Education (Netherlands)

Alex Johnson, Syria Solidarity Australia (Australia)

Ali Bakeer, Senior Researcher, Ibn Khaldun Center (Turkey)

Ali Fathollah-Nejad, Freie Universität Berlin (Germany)

Ali Moravej, Manchester, CT (USA)

Ali Samadi Ahadi, Filmmaker (Germany)

Aliaa Tabbaa,, Hellin ((Spain)

Alicia Fdez Gómez, Oviedo (Spain)

Al-Sheik Hussein, Helsinki (Finland)

Amahl Bishara, Tufts University (USA)

Amal Mouhamad, Berlin (Germany)

Amal Sakkal, Charleston, WV (USA)

Aman Doughan, Beirut (Lebanon)

Amina A., Syria Solidarity New York City (USA)

Ammar Al-Ghabban, Independent educator (UK)

Anahita Razmi, Visual Artist (Germany)

Andrea Love, Educator (USA)

Andrew Berman, Committee in Solidarity with the People of Syria — CISPOS (USA)

Andy Heintz, Ames, IA (USA)

Anette Laszkiewitz (Germany)

Angelica Lepori, member of the cantonal parliament

Ani White, Melbourne (Australia)

Anis Mansouri, Special Education Teacher & Coordinator, Tunisian Internationalists in Switzerland (Switzerland)

Anja Matar, travel agent (Germany)

Ann Eveleth, Anti-War Activist, Washington DC (USA)

Ann Morgen, Dundas (Canada)

Anna Alboth, Civil March For Aleppo (Germany/Poland)

Anna Ferris, Philadelphia, PA (USA)

Anna Sailer, University of Goettingen (Germany)

Anne Michel, feminist and trade unionist (Switzerland)

Anne-Kathryn Bathe, Berlin (Germany)

Anne-Marie McManus, Berlin (Germany)

Ansar Jasim, political researcher, Berlin (Germany)

Anthony Ratcliff, California State University, Los Angeles (USA)

Antonio Moscato, former professor at the University of Salento (Italy)

Anya Briy, PhD student, Binghamton University (USA)

Arash Azizi, PhD Candidate, New York University (USA)

Arianna Parisato (Italy)

Ariel Dorfman, Writer & former advisor to the government of Salvador Allende (Chile/USA)

Art Young, solidarity activist (Canada)

Arthur Esparza, Everett, WA (USA)

Ashley Smith, Member of DSA and the Tempest Collective (USA)

Athena Moss, Journalist (Greece)

Au Loong-Yu, global justice and labour campaigner (Hong Kong)

Austin G Mackell (Australia)

Avanzata Proletaria - <http://www.avanzataproletaria.it> (Italy)

Barbara Blaudzun, MA Student, Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany)

Barbara Epstein, Professor Emerita, University of California, Santa Cruz (USA)

Basem Kan, Göteborg (Sweden)

Bashir Abu-Manneh, Reader, University of Kent (UK)

Becky Carroll, Co-Founder, Stand With Aleppo Campaign (USA)

Ben Manski, Assistant Professor of Sociology, George Mason University (USA)

Bernard Dreano, Activist (France)

Bilal Ansari, Faculty Associate & Director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program, Hartford Seminary (USA)

Bill Fletcher, Jr., Past President of the TransAfrica Forum (USA)

Bill Mullen, West Lafayette, IN (USA)

Bill Weinberg, Journalist and Author (USA)

Birgitte Jensen, Vejle (Denmark)

Boris Thiolay Paris (France)

Brett Ogaard, Seattle, WA (USA)

Brian Aboud, Montréal, Quebec (Canada)

brian bean, organizer/journalist, *Rampant Magazine*, Tempest Socialist Collective (USA)

Brigitte Herremans, Gentbrugge (Belgium)

Bruno Buonomo, researcher, ecosocialist activist (Italy)

Camila Pastor, Research Professor, History Dept., Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (Mexico)

Carol Akhras, Bridgeview, IL (USA)

Carol Murchie, Newport, RI (USA)

Caroline Gilbert, Retired HELP Center Counselor, University of Minnesota (USA)

Caterina Coppola, Activist (Italy)

Catherine Coquio (France)

Catherine Estrade, Singer (France)

Catherine Samary, Economist, Member of the Scientific Council of ATTAC (France)

Cedric Beidatsch, Retired Cook (Australia)

Cesare Quinto, photographer (Italy)

Charles Post, Brooklyn, NY (USA)

Charles-André Udry, Economist, Editor, alencontre.org (Switzerland)

Chaza Charafeddine, Beirut (Lebanon)

Cheryl Zuur, former President, AFSCME Local 444 (USA)

Chris Keulemans, writer and journalist (Netherlands)

Christian Dandrès, Member of Parliament (Conseil National) (Switzerland)

Christian Shaughnessy, Democratic Socialists of America, Inland Empire Chapter (USA)

Christian Varin, Civil Servant & Member of the International Commission of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (France)

Christin Lüttich, Expert on Syria, German-Syrian Solidarity Initiative "Adopt a Revolution" (Germany)

Christoph Reuter, journalist and author, Berlin (Germany)

Cinzia Nachira, Researcher, University of Florence (Italy)

Claire Martenot, feminist and trade unionist (Switzerland)

Claire Nolan, Dublin (Ireland)

Claude Marill, Retired Educator & Trade Unionist, Syndicat National des personnels de l'éducation et du social (France)

Claude Szatan, activist (France)

Clay Claiborne, Director, Vietnam: American Holocaust, Linux Beach Productions (USA)

Colette Morrow, Professor of English, Purdue University Northwest (USA)

Colleen Keyes, Adjunct Faculty, Hartford Seminary (USA)

Cory Strachan, Manistee, MI (USA)

Craig Larkin, Senior Lecturer, King's College London (UK)

Cristèle Jonnart, Ohain (Belgium)

Cristina Cardoño, Mexico City (Mexico)

Dan Buckley, International Marxist-Humanist Organization (USA)

Dan Cahill, Local Union 18, IUPAT, New Jersey (USA)

Dan La Botz, *New Politics* Journal (USA)

Dana Mohseni, Göteborg (Sweden)

Daniel Fischer, Food Not Bombs (USA)

Daniel Ford, Denver, CO (USA)

Daniela Vitkova, Sofia (Bulgaria)

Daniele Rugo, London, England (UK)

Danilo Milinin, Beograd, Beograd (Serbia)

Danny Postel, Writer, Member, Internationalism from Below (USA)

Dario Brandi, documenter (Italy)

Dario Lopreno, Geographer (Switzerland)

Darren Fenwick, Silver Spring MD (USA)

David Bedggood, Syria Solidarity Discussion and Strategy Group (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

David Brophy, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Sydney (Australia)

David L. William, Peregrine Forum of Wisconsin (USA)

David Letwin, South Orange, NJ (USA)

David McNally, Cullen Distinguished Professor of History, University of Houston (USA)

David N. Smith, Professor of Sociology, University of Kansas (USA)

David Turpin, Anti-War Activist (USA)

David Wearing, Senior Teaching Fellow, SOAS, University of London (UK)

David Westman, Communist Voice Organization, USA

Diane Michellini, Dallas, TX (USA)

Diego Giachetti, retired teacher (Italy)

Dilip Simeon, Teacher (India)

Dina Matar, Reader, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Donya Alinejad, Lecturer & Postdoctoral Researcher, Universities of Amsterdam & Utrecht (Netherlands)

Dora Manna, Activist (Italy)

Dylan Connor, singer-songwriter and human rights activist, Connecticut (USA)

Dylan Terpstra, Randolph, NJ (USA)

Ed Sutton, Media Activist and Mutual Aid Organizer (USA)

Edin Hajdarpasic, Associate Professor of History, Loyola University Chicago (USA)

Eileen Boyle, Dublin (Ireland)

Elena De Piccoli, Activist (Italy)

Eleni Varikas, Emerita Professor of Political Science, Université de Paris 8 (France)

Elias Khoury, novelist (Lebanon)

Elizabeth Bard, Little Rock AR (USA)

Elizabeth Lalasz, Chicago, IL (USA)

Elsa Wiehe, Boston University (USA)

ELza Mardirossian Matouk, Dollard-Des Ormeaux (Canada)

Emma Wilde Botta, *New Politics Journal* (USA)

Emran Feroz, Journalist (Germany)

Enrico De Angelis, independent researcher, Berlin (Germany)

Enrico Pulieri MPhil / PhD SOAS University of London (UK)

Enrico Semprini, Sicobas activist (Italy)

Enzo Traverso, Historian, Cornell University (USA)

Eric G., Seattle, WA (USA)

Eric Toussaint, Member of the International Council of the World Social Forum (Belgium)

Estella Carpi, University College London, Istanbul (Turkey)

Eugene Zaikonnikov, Nesttun (Norway)

Eylaf Bader Eddin, Philipps-Universität Marburg \ Post-doc (Germany)

Fabio Alberti, Rome (Italy)

Fabio Bosco, CSP-Conlutas (Brazil)

Fabrizio Gigliani, Trade Union Delegate USB Public Employment (Italy)

Fadi Dayoub, Castelnau Le Lez (France)

Farah Baba, Feminist activist (Lebanon)

Farhad Mirza, Berlin (Germany)

Farizah JAHJAH, Reims (France)

Fatemeh Masjedi, Research Associate, Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin (Germany)

Fatma Alhaji, Helsingborg (Sweden)

Fazlur Rahmat (Indonesia)

Fiorella Sarti, Activist and Translator (Italy)

Firas Aljanadi Leeds (UK)

Firoze Manji, Publisher, Daraja Press (Canada)

Francesca Burns, New York, NY (USA)

Francesca Giura, Activist (Italy)

Francesca Scalinci, Translator and Writer (Italy)

Francis Sitel, Member of the National Animation Team of ENSEMBLE! (France)

Franco Casagrande (Italy)

Franco Turigliatto, former Senator, Anticapitalist Left (Italy)

Françoise Clement, Chatou ((France)

Frankie Hill, Self-Employed (New Zealand)

Frieda Afary, Producer of Iranian Progressives in Translation (USA)

Gabriel Huland, PhD candidate & teaching assistant, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Gail Vignola, South Orange NJ (USA)

Gareth Kenny, Dublin (Ireland)

Gaya Nagahawatta, Translator, (Sri Lanka)

Gennaro Gervasio, Associate Professor in History and Politics of the Middle East, Roma Tre University (Italy)

George De Stefano, Brooklyn NY (USA)

George Monbiot, Author, Journalist & Environmental Activist (UK)

George Wilmers, mathematician, University of Manchester, (retired) (UK)

Gerard Lauton, academic, member of association For a Free and Democratic Syria (France)

Germano Monti, internationalist activist (Italy)

Ghaith Almahayni, Istanbul (Turkey)

Gilbert Achcar, Professor, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Gilberto Conde, Research Professor, El Colegio de México (Mexico)

Giovanna De Luca, Translator-Activist (Italy)

Giovanna Vertova, economist at the University of Bergamo (Italy)

Giuseppe Cossuto, Historian (Italy)

Giuseppe Visconti, Salerno (Italy)

Golineh Atai, TV Journalist (Germany)

Graciela Monteagudo, University of Massachusetts Amherst (USA)

Grant Padgham, Ashford, England (UK)

Günther Orth, Translator (Germany)

Gustavo Gozzi, professor at the University of Bologna (Italy)

Habib Nassar, activist/lawyer (Netherlands)

Hadrien Buclin, Academic & Deputy Ensemble à Gauche in the Parliament of the Governorate of Vaud (Switzerland)

Haideh Moghissi, Emerita Professor, York University (Canada)

Haley Wilson, Westerville, OH (USA)

Halimah El Azem, Berlin (Germany)

Hannu Reime, Helsinki (Finland)

Harald Eitzbach, Journalist (Germany)

Harout Akdedian, Senior Fellow, Striking from the Margins Project, Central European University (USA)

Harsh Kapoor, Independent researcher and editor, (India/France)

Hassan KRAYEM, Amman (Jordan)

Hayfaa Tahan, Milton (Canada)

Hazar Tahan, Beirut (Lebanon)

Heather A. Brown, Associate Professor of Sociology, Westfield State University (USA)

Helen Lackner, Research Associate, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Helen Scott, Burlington, VT (USA)

Hilary Austin, Chicago, IL (USA)

Hilary Oxley, Palmerston North (New Zealand)

Hiroki Okazaki, University lecturer (Japan)

Howard Brick, Louis Evans Professor of History, University of Michigan, USA

Howie Hawkins, 2020 Green Party Candidate for President (USA)

Huda Tahan, Beirut (Lebanon)

Hussam Alshabi, Dubai (UAE)

Ibrahim Chahoud, Berlin (Germany)

Idrees Ahmad, Lecturer in Digital Journalism, University of Stirling (UK)

Ikram Abdelfattah, Beirut (Lebanon)

iris aulbach (Germany)

Isabelle Peillen-Debs Beirut (Lebanon)

Isabelle THIEULEUX, PARIS (France)

Ismail ElAchkar, Khobar, (Saudi Arabia)

Ivan Handler, Retired CIO from Illinois Medicaid & the Health Information Exchange (USA)

Izzat Darwazeh, Professor, University College London (UK)

Jack McGinn, London (UK)

Jacob Miller Brampton (Canada)

Jacques Raillane, Paris (France)

Jaime Pastor, Professor of Political Science, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain)

Jairus Banaji, SOAS, University of London (UK)

James Dickert, Retired Computer Engineer (USA)

James Dickins, Prof. of Arabic, University of Leeds (UK)

James Hamill Leicester (UK)

James Mullally, Human Rights Activist, British Columbia (Canada)

James Smith, Dallas, TX (USA)

Jamie Mayerfeld, Professor of Political Science, University of Washington, Seattle (USA)

Jan Malewski, Editor, *Inprecor* (France)

Jan Toporowski, SOAS University of London (UK)

Jane England, Writer (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Janet Afary, Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity, University of California, Santa Barbara (USA)

Janet Robin Bogle, Grandmother (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Janette Corcelius, Lorton, VA (USA)

Janick Schaufelbuehl, Associate Professor, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

Jason Schulman, Lehman College, City University of New York (USA)

Javier Sethness, Los Angeles CA (USA)

Jean Batou, Historian and Deputy in the Parliament of the Governorate of Geneva (Switzerland)

Jean-Michel Dolivo, Lawyer & Former Deputy, Ensemble à Gauche, Parliament of the Governorate of Vaud (Switzerland)

Jeff Weintraub, Bryn Mawr College, PA (USA)

Jen MacLennan, Independent Media, Syria Solidarity Activist, London (UK)

Jenna Mushin, Coventry, CT (USA)

Jenny Morgan, film-maker (UK)

Jens Hanssen, University of Toronto (Canada)

Jens Lerche, Reader, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Jens-Matin Rode, Berlin (Germany)

Jessy Nassar, PhD candidate, King's College London (Lebanon)

Joachim Haberlen, University of Warwick, (UK)

Joan Connelly, Secretary, Retired USA

Joanne Demchok, Bethesda, MD (USA)

Joanne Roberts (Australia)

Joel Beinin, Professor of Middle East History, Emeritus, Stanford University (USA)

Joël Jovet, Paris (France)

Joey Ayoub, Assoc. Doctoral Researcher, Univ. of Zurich, founder of 'The Fire These Times', writer/journalist (Switzerland)

John A Imani (USA)

John Clarke, Packer Visitor in Social Justice, York University, Toronto (Canada)

John Dunn, former striking coal miner & branch committee member, National Miners Union, Darbyshire Branch (UK)

John Feffer, Director, Foreign Policy In Focus, Institute for Policy Studies (USA)

John Kahler, MD, FAAP (Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics) (USA)

John Reimann, former recording secretary, Carpenters Union Local 713, Editor, *Oakland Socialist* (USA)

John Treat, New York NY (USA)

Jonas Ecke, Berlin (Germany)

Joseph Green, Communist Voice Organization (USA)

Joseph Halevi, Macquarie University, Sydney; International University College of Turin

Josepha Ivanka (Joshka) Wessels, Senior Lecturer, Malmö University (Sweden)

Joshua Cohen, Editor, *Boston Review*; Distinguished Senior Fellow, UC Berkeley; faculty, Apple Univ. (USA)

Joshua Evangelista, journalist (Italy)

Judith Deutsch, psychoanalyst, Toronto (Canada)

Julia Bar-Tal, farmer, Berlin (Germany)

Julien Salingue, Director of the newspaper and website *l'Anticapitaliste*, Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (France)

Juliette Harkin, Writer (UK)

Julnar Tahan, Halba north (Lebanon)

Kaori Hizume, TV producer, Tokyo (Japan)

kawabata erkin (Japan)

Kay Brainerd, Belleville, MI (USA)

Kelly Grotke, PhD, writer, greater Boston (USA)

Ken Hiebert, Palestine Solidarity Activist (Canada)

Kevin B. Anderson, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara (USA)

Kevork Assadourian, Yerevan (Armenia)

Khaled Ghannam Warehouse Manager (Australia)

Khaled Mansour, writer (Egypt)

Khaled Saghie, journalist and writer, Beirut (Lebanon)

Konstantin Rintelmann, PhD candidate, University of Edinburgh (UK)

kris Juhl, Mckinleyville, CA (USA)

L R, Bern (Switzerland)

Lauren Langman, Professor of Sociology, Loyola University of Chicago (USA)

laurent soubise, Lyon (France)

Laurie King, Associate Professor of Teaching, Department of Anthropology, Georgetown University (USA)

Leah Wild, Cheltenham, England (UK)

Lee Wengraf, Queens, NY (USA)

Leonie O. Dowd, Dublin (Ireland)

Leyla Dakhli, Researcher, CNRS (France)

Lilia Marsali, Paris (France)

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