

ISIS Carnage in Paris Portends Repression in Europe and Intensified War in Middle East

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The despicable ISIS attacks on Paris and elsewhere have unleashed intensified war and imperialist machinations over Syria and Iraq, as well as repression of immigrants and renewed Islamophobia. Can the left oppose the carnage on all sides without losing sight of its emancipatory aims?

The November 13 murder of over 130 totally innocent French civilians by criminal jihadists linked to the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) has brought the carnage of Syria and Iraq to the heart of Europe. Operating in three teams, these ISIS members massacred the audience at a rock concert, also attacking a soccer stadium and several restaurants. Claiming to be Muslims, they were influenced by a far-right sectarian ideology rooted in extreme fundamentalism that is alien to the vast majority of the world's Muslims. Most troubling of all in terms of the current state of European "civilization," especially its treatment of minorities, is that most of the perpetrators grew up in France, as members of its deeply oppressed and embittered Muslim minority.

French President François Hollande immediately declared a "war on terrorism," thus dignifying these criminals with the more honorable label of soldiers. Here he followed in the footsteps of U.S. imperialism's failed "war on terror" after the attacks of September 11, 2001, language that of course allows the military to be deployed, both at home and abroad. Hollande also declared a state of emergency, banning all public demonstrations and allowing warrantless searches and the use of the military on the streets of France. He then proposed to extend it for three months, something that would require a change in the Constitution, and which was supported almost unanimously by the National Assembly (with 6 abstentions from leftists and ecologists). A social democrat with neoliberal tendencies who remained largely silent while Germany and the EU put the screws to Greece's leftwing government last summer, Hollande immediately received the praise of his rightwing opponents in France, surely an ominous sign.

While France immediately launched new airstrikes against ISIS in Syria, the real action was elsewhere, in the diplomatic maneuvering among the U.S., France, Russia, and Iran. It now seems surer than even a month ago, as was put forth in the statement of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization ("Russian Intervention in Syria and Imperialist Realignment," Oct. 22, 2015) that these powers will unite to roll up ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and that they will do so in a manner that hands a victory to the murderous Assad regime over its internal opponents, more than 200,000 of whom it has slaughtered, and some of whom remain true to the emancipatory ideals of the 2011 uprising. Like the additional civilians who will surely die as these powers attack or pretend to attack ISIS, these Syrian oppositionists, until recently nominally supported by the U.S. and France, will be sacrificed as pawns in a great power game. Whether Bashar Assad himself is forced out (unlikely) or placed in some kind of nominally broader governing coalition stitched together by these global and regional powers, all of these "order-mongering powers" (to use Marx's expression) have made it crystal clear that they want the Assad regime and especially the Syrian state apparatus to survive, fearing the chaos of another Libya or another Iraq.

ISIS has gotten exactly what it wanted out of the Paris massacre, in two ways. First, France's 4.7 million strong Muslim community, percentage-wise the largest in Western Europe, is sure to feel the brunt of the state crackdown and likely of popular vengeance as well. In this regard, it is notable that Hollande has not said much in terms of declaring that the state needs to protect French Muslims from persecution and discrimination. This will create the possibility of more recruits for ISIS, whether in the impoverished suburban ghettos (*banlieues*) that ring the cities or inside the prisons, in both of which Muslims constitute a disproportionate part of the population.

Second, the attack will burnish ISIS's image outside France as a viable force against Western imperialism, even as it has suffered defeats at the hands of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, who liberated the Yazidi town of Sinjar in northern Iraq just one day before the Paris attacks. It was quite moving to see Yazidi forces take part in the battle to liberate the town where genocide and sexual slavery had been carried out against their people in 2014.

Even the victory for the democratic forces in Sinjar carries some worrisome contradictions within it, however. The U.S., which is aiding the Kurds with airstrikes, has unsurprisingly been favoring the conservative, Turkey-aligned Barzani Kurds, rather than the Syrian Kurds. It is of course the latter who have done the bulk of the fighting, whose forces include women officers, and who did not run away in 2014 in the face of ISIS like the Barzani group did.

Another terrible result of the Paris massacre is the anti-immigrant hysteria and Islamophobia that is being whipped up not only in France, but also in Germany, the U.S., and elsewhere. The fact that one of the Paris attackers seems to have crossed from Turkey into Greece in October amid the wave of refugees from Syria has helped to spur on this anti-immigrant racism. Conservative U.S. politicians have fanned Islamophobia by coming out against admitting any Syrian refugees at all, while Germany has come under pressure to curtail its far more generous policy, which has projected admitting 800,000 refugees and asylum seekers.

It is important to underline that the Paris attacks are merely the most dramatic so far of a whole series of inhuman massacres by this reactionary, racist, misogynist organization. Because they targeted Europeans in one of the globe's most important cultural centers, the Paris attacks have made the whole world pause. But despite the media focus on Paris, we should not forget ISIS's other recent outrages, among them a series of attacks in Middle Eastern countries that have killed far more than in Paris: more than 100 killed on October 10 by ISIS suicide bombers at a leftwing pro-Kurdish rally in Ankara where the Turkish police seemed to have disappeared, 224 killed on October 31 by an ISIS bomb placed aboard a Russian airline carrying tourists from Egypt, 43 killed by ISIS suicide bombers on November 12 in Beirut in a predominantly Shia neighborhood. And that is not counting the ongoing carnage in Syria and Iraq themselves, or the nearly totally ignored depredations of Boko Haram, and ISIS-aligned group in Nigeria that has kidnapped and enslaved thousands of African women.

Most members of the global left point out, and rightly so, that ISIS grew in the wake of Bush's disastrous war in Iraq, which toppled a militarized dictatorship but never succeeded in setting up a stable puppet regime in its place. This created an opening for all sorts of sectarian Islamist parties, both Shia and Sunni, and among which ISIS is the most virulent strain, but not the only brutal or reactionary one. Most leftists also note that ISIS emerged out of Al Qaeda, which itself emerged out of the Arabs who came to fight in Afghanistan against the Russian-backed regime in the 1980s, and whom the U.S. (and its allies Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Britain, France, Germany, etc.) lavishly supported as part of their Cold War rivalry with Russia. Such explanations are an important and necessary part of grasping the nature of these events, given all the blood U.S. imperialism has shed over the decades, from Vietnam to Indonesia, and from Nicaragua to Congo.

Although necessary, such explanations are insufficient. This is because they put the entirety of the blame on a single force, U.S. imperialism. This leaves unanswered questions like these: First, in so many parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, why has Islamism displaced the left on the campuses and in many communities where the socialists or leftwing nationalists had once predominated? Clearly, one must look here not just at U.S. destabilization schemes like 1953 in Iran, but also at the failures of the left itself, both regionally and globally. Second, one could consider France itself, with a Muslim population drawn primarily from North Africa and that is among the most economically exploited and oppressed groups in Western Europe. In a country where revolutionary and Marxist traditions were especially strong, how has the left increasingly lost ground in these communities to religious identitarianism, even when it does not take the form of outright jihadism? Here one would have to look at the outright racism found all too frequently in the two large leftist parties, the Communists and the Socialists, and beyond. One could easily give more examples.

Recall that during the days of outright Stalinist dictatorship in Russia, the best parts of the left knew how to support both the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua and the Solidarnosc workers' movement in Poland. We also knew how to oppose Mao's repression of the youth in China, which he disguised as an anti-bureaucratic "cultural" revolution, while at the same time pointing to his betrayal of the Vietnamese in their struggle against U.S. imperialism. Later, we worked out how to oppose both U.S. imperialist machinations and the efforts by Khomeini and his followers to usurp the Iranian revolution, beginning with their forced re-veiling of women in March 1979, something they termed a blow against the culture of imperialism.

Yet another deleterious effect of the Paris attacks is that they will further undermine what remains of the spirit and the actuality of the 2011 Arab revolutions, especially in Syria, but really throughout the region. While some green shoots remain amid the repression in Egypt and elsewhere, as in the new Tunisian constitution and the Kurdish left in both Syria/Iraq and Turkey, these will now be in greater danger. (On these green shoots, see my earlier "Four Years After the Arab Revolutions: Fighting on Amid Reactionary Retrenchment," *Logos*, Summer 2015). The global effect of this undermining of the spirit of 2011 is not to be underestimated. This is because it was those very Arab revolutions, which as is often forgotten were about class and economic oppression as much as political emancipation from tyranny, that touched off the era of radicalization of the past few years, from Occupy to Podemos in Spain and similar movements globally.

Inside the U.S., the Paris attacks are being used by the state, by capital, and by reactionary political forces. Everywhere, there are calls for more security, more surveillance by the state, more hunkering down behind the established powers of the state and of capital. There is an attempt to change the subject from Black Lives Matter, from obscene economic inequality, and from looming ecological disaster. The movements centered on these progressive and revolutionary causes, and similar ones around the world, will now face the challenge of operating in a situation where the global "war on terror" is being ramped up once again. How these movements negotiate the treacherous paths of the new global situation will be crucial, both for their survival and their further development. I refer to movements not only in the U.S., but also those against austerity in Greece and southern Europe, to the new energy kicked up by Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the British Labor Party, and to those planning to march for the environment in Paris in December, a march Hollande wants to ban in the name of security.

One crucial point will be how we can separate ourselves both from the carnage of ISIS and the various imperialist and regional powers that are seeking to gain from the Paris events. Another key issue will be how, amid all this terrorism and war, we can keep the focus on the needed uprooting of capitalism, not as an abstract universal, but in relationship to actually existing social movements against class and racial oppression, environmental destruction, and sexual and gender

subordination.

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