Washington and Moscow: Halt the Bombing and Stop Supporting Dictators in the Middle East!

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Outside powers have had a long and shameful history of cynically supporting dictatorships in the Middle East because maintaining friendly autocratic states in the region suits their geopolitical objectives. And today those criminal policies are flagrantly on display.

The United States

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been the world's leading ally of the Saudi Arabian kingdom, a violent, ultra-reactionary fundamentalist dictatorship that this year has beheaded more than a hundred people, possibly more than ISIS.[1] Saudi Arabia is currently leading a bombing campaign in Yemen that has indiscriminately killed many hundreds of civilians. Weapons—including cluster bombs—intelligence, military advisers, and diplomatic support for that bombing campaign are provided by Washington.

Egypt's Mubarak dictatorship was backed by the United States for three decades. He was ousted in the Arab Spring, but when the Egyptian military took power again, Secretary of State John Kerry declared that they were "restoring democracy"[2]—and U.S. military aid has been restored.

As Israel continues its nearly 50-year dictatorial rule over the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Washington provides the military aid and diplomatic support at the United Nations that make the occupation possible.

Although Damascus had long been allied with the Soviet Union and then with Russia, Washington backed Syria's bloody suppression of the Palestinian movement and the Lebanese left in the 1970s and counted on its support in the 1991 invasion of Iraq and the "war on terror." Assad's torture chambers proved especially useful to the U.S. policy of "torture by proxy," which involved sending prisoners to Syria as part of the Bush administration's "extraordinary rendition" program.[3]

Assad's usefulness to Washington ended when he drew too close to Iran and seemed likely to be overthrown by the 2011 Syrian revolution. At that point, U.S. policy shifted towards trying to win influence among the rebels, though carefully limiting the kinds of weapons they could receive.[4] More recently, Obama, along with Britain, France, and other U.S. allies, has turned to a policy of selective bombing, not of Assad, but of ISIS, and sometimes other opposition groups, leading most of the rebels to condemn the air campaign.[5] Washington has generally favored a "Yemen solution," keeping Syria's Baathist police state apparatus in power, preferably without the Assad family mafia—although lately it has moved towards the "political solution" favored by Paris and London, which might include Assad.

ISIS might not even exist, or at least not wield the power it now possesses, had it not been for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It was out of the extreme chaos and vicious sectarian conflict which engulfed Iraq in the wake of the American occupation that ISIS emerged, recruiting thousands of brutal jihadi fighters in Iraq and especially in eastern Syria. This was not, as many argue, because Saddam's

regime was thoroughly dismantled, leaving a “power vacuum,” but because regime change was imposed from outside by an American government that showed contempt for the Iraqi people and hostility to genuine democracy. If Saddam Hussein’s repressive state had been overthrown from within by a coalition of Sunni, Shiite, and secular democratic movements against tyranny, the subsequent history of Iraq—and Syria—might have been fundamentally different. Certainly, this coalition would have been difficult to build given Iraq’s long history of sectarianism, but the U.S. invasion stifled any possibility of such a development.

We condemn and call for an immediate end to U.S. military interventionism and support for dictatorships and authoritarian governments in the Middle East and around the world. U.S. bombing of Syria and Iraq must stop—likewise bombings of Afghanistan, where the horrific slaughter of helpless hospital patients and medical personnel in Kunduz has added a particularly gruesome outrage to the United States’ long list of war crimes.

Russia

Russia has been a major backer of the Assad family dictatorship since its inception in 1970. Since the uprising against Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Russian support—along with support from Iran and Hezbollah—has been critical to maintaining the survival of the Syrian regime. That support has dwarfed the outside aid going to opponents of Assad. Now Russia has markedly increased its military efforts on behalf of the Syrian despot with bombing, the launching of cruise missiles, and the announced possibility of “volunteer” ground troops.[6]

To be sure, ISIS is opposed by many—including by Syrian rebels—but Russian military involvement is not confined to attacking ISIS. In fact, Russian attacks seem on all accounts to concentrate on non-ISIS forces, including against non-jihadi groups. Clearly, this serves to bolster the Assad regime. (And, ironically, it may also be helping ISIS by weakening those who have been fighting against them.[7]) Moreover, Russian bombing has already killed numerous civilians and damaged medical facilities, and there are reports of the use of cluster munitions.[8]

In his focus on non-ISIS rebels, Putin is behaving no differently from Assad. Assad has always concentrated his fire on rebel groups other than ISIS. In 2014, only 6 percent of Assad’s “counter-terrorism” operations were aimed at ISIS.[9] (And ISIS returned the favor: only 13 percent of their attacks that year targeted Syrian security forces.[10]) The Syrian air force, in addition to barrel bombs and chlorine gas, is reported to have been using cluster bombs since 2012.[11]

The exact strength of the non-jihadi forces among the Syrian rebels is unclear, but what can’t be doubted is that attacking them is a major blow in favor of the Assad dictatorship, which is why there have been protests against the Russian bombings in Aleppo.[12]

Of course, Assad is thrilled at the new Russian role, and Putin hides behind Assad’s invitation to justify his intervention. But invitation by a dictator provides no more legitimacy in the case of Syria than it did when the South Vietnamese government invited in the U.S. armed forces or when the Salvadoran junta invited in U.S. military advisers. Supporting tyrants is wrong, invitation or not.

We condemn the Russian intervention on the side of the Syrian dictatorship and demand that it cease immediately.

The great powers have long pursued their own narrow interests in the Middle East, whether on behalf of oil or strategic advantage, with no concern for the well-being and democratic rights of the people of that region. There is now a risk of spiraling escalation and superpower conflict, with grave consequences.

On the ground, there are people armed and unarmed who are challenging dictatorships across the region, aspiring to more democratic futures. It is with them that we express our solidarity.

The inspiring popular uprisings of the Arab Spring opened up a new era of democratic challenge from below to the police states of the Middle East. Despite defeats in Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, and despite the drastically reduced strength of secular and non-jihadi democratic oppositional forces in Syria, peoples' revolution remains the only progressive solution to the problems of authoritarianism, repression, and sectarian strife in the region. The intervention of the United States and Russia, as well as regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, rather than strengthening democratic forces, instead creates a powerful obstacle to their success and indeed a threat to their very survival. All of these states fear democracy in the Middle East like poison.

We firmly reject the approach taken by the Obama administration and by many on the left that choose support for Assad or his regime as the only alternative to ISIS. The extraordinary barbarousness and cruelty of ISIS have horrified much of the world. But the Syrian regime, a torture state that has become one of the most murderous in the world today, is no alternative, and its monstrous slaughter of the Syrian people in fact serves to promote the spread of ISIS.

The suffering of the Syrian people, and of other peoples in the Middle East, has been appalling. Only indigenous democratic forces are capable of ending the peoples' agony. That is why we continue to support the authentically democratic elements of the Syrian revolution. Their victory is by no means assured, but at the very least we must exert the utmost pressure on the United States and Russia to abandon policies that allow the dictators to continue torturing and murdering with impunity.

Footnotes

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3. Center for Constitutional Rights, The Story of Maher Arar: Rendition to Torture, 2008.
4. C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.," New York Times, Mar. 24, 2013.
5. Michael Karadjis, "Syrian rebels overwhelmingly condemn US bombing as an attack on revolution," Sept. 25, 2014.
6. Andrew E. Kramer and Anne Barnard, "Russian Soldiers Join Syria Fight," New York Times, Oct. 5, 2015.
7. Sam Jones, Noam Raydan, Kathrin Hille, "As Russia steps up Syria bombardment, Isis gains ground in Moscow," Financial Times, Oct. 9, 2015.
8. Reuters, "At least 39 civilians, 14 fighters killed since start of Russian air strikes: monitor," Oct. 3, 2015; Physicians for Human Rights, "Russian Warplanes Strike Medical Facilities in Syria," Oct. 7, 2015; Eliot Higgins, "Mounting Evidence of Russian Cluster Bomb Use in Syria," Oct. 6, 2015.
9. Cassandra Vinograd and Ammar Cheikh Omar, "Syria, ISIS Have Been 'Ignoring' Each Other on Battlefield, Data Suggests," NBC news, Dec. 14, 2014.
10. Vinograd and Omar.
11. Richard Norton-Taylor, "Banned cluster bombs 'used in Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Sudan, Libya'," Guardian, Sept. 3, 2015.
12. Reuters, "Syrians protest against Russian air strikes," Oct. 4, 2015.