

No to Assad's Brutality, No to Isis, No to U.S. and Russian Bombing and Military Forces in Syria, For a Revival of the Arab Spring

We are horrified by the relentless, cruel attacks of the Assad regime, aided by Moscow and Tehran, on the Syrian people. For sheer brutality the butchers in Damascus have few equals in the world



today. But we also wholeheartedly condemn U.S. bombing and military forces in Syria, which will kill innocent people and contribute nothing towards a just solution to the Syrian conflict, while at the same time serving to deepen the reactionary U.S. military presence in the Middle East and reinforce Assad's rhetorical claim that he is defending the Syrian people against Western imperialism, hollow though that claim may be.

Assad claims to be the only force standing between "stability" and the victory of ISIS, but this ignores the fact that authoritarian, repressive regimes like those in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Syria are highly effective recruiting agents for ISIS and similar jihadis. The other major recruiters for religious extremists and terrorists in the Middle East are the United States and its allies, with their bloody history of intervention and, in the case of the U.S., virtually carte blanche support for Israel. And while President Trump's missile attack on the Syrian Shayrat airbase may have been limited, such bombing has its own logic, dangerously putting U.S. imperial prestige on the line and thus potentially triggering escalating attacks and

counterattacks.

We are witnessing a set of deadly symbioses in Syria: Assad and ISIS use one another as justification for their own savageries, while the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Russia and Iran on the other, point to the very real crimes of one another to excuse interventions which in no way protect or defend the Syrian people, but rather serve their imperial (or in the case of Iran, sub-imperial) interests in the region.

The war in Syria cannot be understood apart from the broader political landscape in the Middle East. The popular revolutionary uprisings of the Arab Spring, from Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain to Syria, Libya and Yemen, offered a glimpse of a democratic and just future for the peoples of the region. For now, they have been thwarted, and in most cases, apparently crushed by a combination of domestic reactionary forces and the support of their foreign patrons.

However, the resistance in Syria has proven amazingly resilient: as recently as March of last year courageous street protests under the slogan "The Revolution Continues" erupted in Syrian cities during the brief cessation of hostilities. As reported in *The New Statesman*, "When fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra tried to storm one of these demonstrations in the town of Maarat al-Numan, the protesters drowned them out by chanting, 'One! One! One! The Syrian people are one!' This is a maxim from the incipient, secular phases of the uprising, in which Syrians struggled to stem the tide of rising sectarian and ethnic tension injected by the jihadists' engagement in the conflict." (1)

It is truly a time of colossal, obscene double standards.

We see Donald Trump, along with most of the mainstream

media and leading Republican and Democratic Party politicians, hypocritically deploring the massacre of innocent men, women and babies in Syria – while they remain coldly indifferent to the massacres and loss of human life at the hands of the U.S. and the forces it supports in Mosul and Yemen. And meanwhile desperate refugees from Syria's carnage are cruelly turned away from U.S. borders.

We also see Donald Trump welcoming Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, while brazenly dismissing any human rights concerns and continuing Obama's policy of generous military aid, despite Sisi's horrific record of murdering and imprisoning thousands of his opponents. It is safe to predict, moreover, that if and when the Islamic State gains more and more supporters in Egypt in response to Sisi's dictatorial rule, we will hear a chorus of apologists saying that unsavory as he may be, Sisi as a secularist leader is better than the barbaric jihadis, has significant popular support, and therefore has to be supported.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, the Russian government and its news agency RT deplore the heartrending destruction of neighborhoods and deaths of civilians in Mosul and Yemen and decry the callousness of the U.S. military – while justifying Assad's attacks on the people of Aleppo and across Syria. In fact, Russian military involvement, including aerial support for attacks on civilian and military opponents of the regime, has actually played a significant, likely critical, role in keeping Assad's regime in power.

We completely reject these grotesque alternatives. We urgently hope for a revival of the movements and the spirit of the Arab Spring, which offer the only possibility of breaking out of the death spiral of Middle Eastern politics. Many will dismiss this perspective as impractical, but what is truly impractical is the idea that the great powers, each with its own imperial agenda, will bring justice or democracy. If,

against enormous odds, democratic forces are able to wrest an agreement that protects them from continuing slaughter by Assad and ISIS and leaves them in a position to struggle and fight again another day, then their decision to accept such a limited agreement should be respected. But even such an agreement will only be won as a result of pressure from the Syrian people, not through the initiative of outside powers who, despite their differences and rivalries, share a deep hostility to a resurgence of autonomous popular forces in Syria or anywhere else.

Democratic popular forces may be weak today, but our only principled and practical course is to declare our solidarity with their struggles, try to strengthen them, and oppose all those who attempt to subvert and destroy them.

(1) The 2016 demonstration in Maarat al-Numan is described in this *New Statesman* article. Protests in other Syrian cities are described in these articles: [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

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