

Roundtable on the Syrian Crisis

August 31, 2013

The Campaign for Peace and Democracy has posted an interesting symposium on Syria. It was mostly written before the August 21 chemical weapons attack and the resulting war threat from Washington. None of the symposium participants favors U.S. military action, but the symposium provides useful background on the Syrian uprising that helps us make sense of the current situation.

Here I post the introduction to the symposium as well as the response by Thomas Harrison and Joanne Landy to the other contributions. All the essays linked below are worth reading.

CAMPAIGN FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY ROUNDTABLE ON THE SYRIAN CRISIS

In June 2013 the Campaign for Peace and Democracy's co-directors issued a personal statement on the Syrian revolution. At that time, we invited contributions to an on-line symposium, hoping to stimulate a vigorous debate over the issues raised by our statement. What follows are several pieces that in various ways oppose, support or supplement our position on Syria.

The symposium contributions were written before a large-scale poison gas attack with many casualties in the rebel-controlled Ghouta suburbs of Damascus on August 21, 2013. Likewise, they were all written before Washington's deployment of military forces to the region and its virtual announcement that military action is forthcoming. Whether or not it is definitively proven that the chemical weapons attack was carried out by the Syrian government (which in our view is very likely the case), we - along with all of the symposium participants - strongly oppose military intervention by the United States and its allies, for reasons explained in our symposium response. It's clear that whatever military measures the Obama administration may now adopt in Syria stem from a concern to rescue U.S. "credibility" as a global hegemonic power, not a genuine concern to defend the victims of Assad's brutality, a concern of which it has given little previous indication in the case of Syria or anywhere else. On the contrary, Washington continues to support and supply weapons to repressive governments in Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the world.

The first contribution, from Molly Nolan, characterizes the Syrian conflict as a civil war rather than a revolution, and argues against any of the forces, including secular democratic forces in the field, receiving arms. Instead, Nolan maintains that the only solution is negotiations between the Assad regime and its opponents, with no pressure for regime change from the Obama administration, and urges progressives not to take sides in the conflict.

Michael Karadjis, on the other hand, maintains that the Syrian conflict remains, fundamentally, a democratic revolt against dictatorship. While acknowledging the reactionary Islamist threat, he points to strong democratic resistance at the grassroots and argues that the Islamists are not yet in control. However, while defending the right of Syrian revolutionaries to obtain arms, he believes that the ongoing militarization of the conflict favors both Assad and the Islamists; therefore he thinks a ceasefire would be in the best interest of the revolution, allowing a revival of the mass movement that initiated the revolt against the regime.

David McReynolds highlights the ruinous history of U.S. "humanitarian intervention," citing the devastating wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. Like Nolan, McReynolds regards the fighting in Syria as a

civil war, with Assad retaining significant popular support – though he rejects the idea that Assad and his regime are "socialists under assault." McReynolds is against all military aid to the rebels and calls for the U.S. to work with Russia to bring the warring parties to a peace conference.

Assaf Kfoury supports the Syrian revolution, but he thinks that any weapons from outside are more than likely to come with U.S. influence and interference attached, and that they will induce Russia, Iran and possibly China to increase the supply of weaponry to Assad. Kfoury, like Karadjis, looks to an internationally-supervised ceasefire and the coming Geneva-2 conference to bring at least a temporary respite to the violence.

Michael Eisenscher sends us the statement of U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW), along with additional commentary, calling on Congress and the Administration to send humanitarian aid rather than arms to Syria and to promote a political solution. Eisenscher also includes a link to a petition that USLAW signed along with other peace groups that opposes military intervention and opposes arming the rebels or creating a no-fly zone. It calls on the U.S. to focus on increasing humanitarian assistance through the UN and building active multilateral diplomacy with all involved parties for an immediate ceasefire without preconditions, a full arms embargo, and negotiations to end Syria's civil war.

Salameh Kaileh favors the revolutionaries receiving weapons where they can, and argues that all the outside powers, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have refused to arm the revolution in a way that would actually enable it to win. Instead, he says, they favor what they call a "political solution" that would consign Syria to Russia's sphere of influence.

Finally, we publish an interview "Imperialism, Sectarianism and Syria's Revolution" with Joseph Daher, a member of the Syrian Revolutionary Left Current. Daher supports the Syrian revolution while arguing that reactionary forces like Jabhat al Nusra are being well-funded by some Gulf countries in order to transform the revolution into a sectarian war. Unlike many Western leftists, Daher insists that the Syrian conflict is not a proxy war and that Assad and the countries supporting him are not anti-imperialist. Instead he calls for solidarity with the revolutionary and democratic popular committees and organizations.

The symposium concludes with a response from the CPD co-directors, "No to U.S. War on Syria! No to Assad! Yes to a Democratic Syrian Revolution!"

- Questions about the Harrison-Landy Statement on Syria, by Molly Nolan
- Syria: The Question of Arming the Rebels, by Michael Karadjis
- Syria: What Is To Be Done?, by David McReynolds
- Comments on "On Syria: A Personal Statement," by Assaf Kfoury
- US Labor Against the War (USLAW) Statement on the Syrian Crisis, with a comment by Michael Eisenscher
- The Armed Struggle and Arming the Syrian Opposition, by Salameh Kaileh
- Interview with Joseph Daher, "Imperialism, Sectarianism and Syria's Revolution"
- Response from Thomas Harrison and Joanne Landy: "No to U.S. War on Syria! No to Assad! Yes to a Democratic Syrian Revolution!"

RESPONSE FROM THOMAS HARRISON AND JOANNE LANDY (Aug. 27, 2013)

No to U.S. War on Syria!

No to Assad!

Yes to a Democratic Syrian Revolution!

We would like to thank all of the contributors to the CPD symposium for helping to enrich the

discussion of how peace activists and leftists should respond to the unfolding events in Syria, and to the escalating threats of war on Syria by the United States and its allies.

Our fundamental disagreement with David McReynolds, Molly Nolan and Michael Eisenscher is that we believe it is essential to take sides in Syria. The Assad regime is extraordinarily cruel and tyrannical, and while it does retain support among sectors of the Syrian population, it is hated by the millions of Syrians, most likely the great majority, who have suffered under its rule. Although the fight against Assad has been complicated, and to a significant extent compromised, by the role of sectarian jihadists, it is still predominantly a popular democratic revolution. (See, for example, Amnesty International's Map of Non-Violent Activism in Syria.)

We agree with Michael Karadjis when he says that "the situation on the side of the revolution is still fluid, there is still struggle, the reactionary forces by no means dominate." Karadjis cites the reports of those on the ground who describe life in many areas of Syria controlled by the rebels, where authoritarian jihadists are not dominant, or where they are challenged by local people. He and others like Joseph Daher from the Syrian Revolutionary Left Current note that civic councils and local coordinating committees have sprung up in rebel-controlled areas — and when extremist political Islamists have tried to impose their doctrines on the population, they have often been resisted. Nonetheless, as we acknowledged in our initial statement, there is unquestionably a very real and growing threat of the Syrian revolution being hijacked by reactionary Islamists. Consequently we see an emerging three-cornered struggle with three contenders: supporters of the Assad regime, foreign and Syrian Islamists, and democratic forces resisting both.

David McReynolds rightly describes the retrograde aims of the U.S. government in Syria, the Middle East, and throughout the world, and argues that the left "cannot count on an imperial power to act with democratic and humanitarian concerns." Indeed, in our view, and in the view, it seems, of all of the contributors to the symposium, the sordid history of U.S. interventions in country after country stands as rejoinder to those who would hope that "this time" the United States military could play a positive role.

In our original statement, we said: "Consistent with our strong opposition to any kind of military intervention in Syria by the U.S., or other foreign powers, we also oppose providing air cover or establishing no fly zones. We do believe, however, that the democratic opponents of the Assad dictatorship have the right to get guns where they can, while resisting all attempts by those who provide arms to acquire political and military influence in return." We continue to defend this right, and we agree with Karadjis that merely receiving arms from foreign countries has never been the "final determinant" of a revolutionary movement's politics. But we also recognize that since none of the governments in the region or in the West actually favor a mass popular democratic victory, they are extremely reluctant to offer the democratic opposition significant weaponry. Moreover, like Karadjis, we do not call on the United States to arm the rebels, because we are unwilling to take responsibility for the way that the U.S. government will inevitably use any offer of weapons to attempt to manipulate the struggle and buttress its ongoing reactionary role in the Middle East.

We agree with Assaf Kfoury, Michael Karadjis, Salameh Kaileh and Joseph Daher that only the Syrian people can win their own freedom, and that the Syrian revolution has no real and reliable international support besides the revolutionary movements in the neighboring nations. This is why we remain extremely dubious about negotiations brokered by the big powers, such as the upcoming G-2 Conference. It may or may not be true, as Kfoury argues, that the current military imbalance is so overwhelmingly in favor of Assad that a brokered cease-fire is the only way to prevent further slaughter. But we should have no illusions. Russia and the U.S., if they can agree to use their "good offices" to resolve the Syrian conflict, will most likely seek a "Yemeni-type" solution — one which leaves the Assad regime intact, with or without Assad himself remaining in power.

The recent events in Egypt underscore the tremendous hurdles facing democratic revolutionary movements in the Middle East, but they also demonstrate the ongoing vital grassroots resistance to neoliberal, authoritarian governments that is the embryo of an egalitarian and democratic alternative. As long as these forces remain alive, they deserve our support and solidarity. What they do not need is a destructive, cynical and self-serving military strike on Syria by the U.S. and its allies.