We Oppose Both a U.S.-led Attack on Syria and the Brutal Regime of Bashar al-Assad

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Pressured by the British Parliament's historic rejection of military action against Syria and by the great opposition of most of the American people to getting involved in yet another bloody war in the Middle East, President Obama has been forced to take his plan to attack Syria to Congress. At the moment, Congress appears to be sharply divided over whether or not to support the President, with many still undecided, and it is therefore imperative to take advantage of widespread antiwar opinion to make the case now against U.S. military intervention in Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government is a cruel dictatorship that, like the vicious regimes of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Tunisia's Zine Ben Ali, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and Bahrain's Hamad Al Khalifa, deserves to be overthrown by its people. But military assaults by the United States and its allies will do nothing to advance struggles for democratic change and social justice in Syria; in fact, they will most likely have the opposite result.

Any military effect of missile strikes on Assad's forces will be outweighed by its political effect: strengthening Assad's "anti-imperialist" posture internationally and his nationalist credentials within Syria itself, which is where the essential battle is taking place. This is all the more likely if, as is virtually inevitable, an attack causes "collateral damage" — that is, the deaths of innocent Syrian civilians. Indeed, many Syrians who support the opposition because of their revulsion at Assad's brutality may have second thoughts if Obama and his partners carry out an attack on their country. Some elements of the opposition welcome a U.S. attack, but it is hard to believe that most ordinary Syrians do; it would be criminal to add to their suffering simply to enforce Obama's "red line."

The claim that the Assad regime is guilty of the horrendous chemical weapons assault on Damascus suburbs cannot be simply dismissed as pro-war propaganda. The claim may very well be true, but even so we must insist that this cannot justify U.S. missiles. Obama seeks congressional approval for a "limited, targeted" attack on Syria *not* because he wants to prevent the use of chemical weapons by everyone, but in order to buttress U.S. "credibility" as a reactionary superpower in the Middle East and around the world; support for U.S. military intervention in Syria serves only to legitimize and reinforce that power.

Moreover, when it comes to chemical weapons, the United States itself is far from having clean hands. CIA intelligence helped Saddam Hussein massacre Iranians with sarin nerve gas and mustard gas, and Washington made sure that Saddam faced no consequences for gassing Iranians or Kurds. In 2003 Congress imposed sanctions on Syria for having a chemical weapons stockpile, but gave a free pass to Egypt and Israel, both of which continue to this day to have chemical arsenals and, like Syria, have refused to accept the Chemical Weapons Convention. U.S. forces used depleted uranium in the Gulf and Iraq wars and in Fallujah attacked Iraqi civilians with white phosphorous, a hideous incendiary weapon that melts human flesh. And let us never forget the 20 million tons of chemicals, including extremely toxic Agent Orange, that were dumped on Vietnam from 1962 to 1971.

Nor is the U.S. motivated by a love for democracy in the Middle East: witness, for example, Washington's support of Mubarak and Ben Ali which persisted until almost the last moment, its sponsorship of the Yemen "solution," under which the dictator Ali Saleh resigned in favor of his deputy Abd Hadi, leaving the core of the Saleh regime in place, and the continuing close ties to the

brutal Egyptian military, even after the coup in July of this year. In Syria it is no secret that the United States fears not only Al-Qaeda and the other armed jihadist groups that are active in the Syrian opposition, but also the threat of people's power embodied in the courageous demonstrations of millions in the streets against the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

It is also essential to remember that throughout the Middle East people have protested not only against dictatorship but also against terrible economic hardship and privation, which result from the harsh policies of governments that have acquiesced in the austerity programs of the International Monetary Fund and other enforcers of global neoliberalism — programs wholly supported by the United States. Washington's persistent promotion of these economic policies indicates what the true aims would be of any U.S. military intervention in the region.

The issue is not whether or not Assad's government is guilty of chemical warfare. If Congress goes along with President Obama's request for a "limited, targeted" attack on Syria in order to buttress U.S. credibility as global and Middle East hegemon, there is good reason to believe that Assad will respond. What comes next? No-one can predict, but the dangers of horrific escalation are very real.

Right now, many members of Congress have stated that they will support the President, or that they are "on the fence," despite the fact that their constituents overwhelmingly oppose an attack on Syria. Our leaders will respond, if at all, only to active protest. At the same time, we believe it is absolutely crucial for the antiwar movement to distinguish itself from those who make excuses for or even cheer on the murderous Assad regime. The only principled and effective basis for opposition to U.S. imperialism is consistent support for democracy and opposition to authoritarianism, torture and repression, whatever the source. We urge those who participate in demonstrations to carry signs that denounce both a U.S.-led attack against Syria and the bloody Assad regime.

Because of Iraq and Afghanistan, because of the heroic revelations of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, there is an all-pervading and profoundly healthy skepticism toward U.S. foreign policy among Americans and throughout the world. Public opinion, here and abroad, is on our side. We must act now to stop Obama's catastrophic assault on Syria.