SYRIA

Anatomy of Another U.S. Imperialist War

By Jeff Mackler
Table of Contents

Introduction................................................................................. p.5

U.S. imperialism’s Syria strategy
January 18, 2016........................................................................p.9

U.S. Threatens Syria War Escalation
July 20, 2016..............................................................................p.23

U.S. imperialist war in Syria
Acid test for antiwar movement
November 16, 2016..................................................................p.31

Socialist Action statement on
U.S. missile strike on Syria
April 10, 2017............................................................................p.41

Trump’s ‘no fly zone’ escalates
U.S. war against Syria
July 3, 2017..............................................................................p.45

Syria: Did Trump really end
CIA’s secret war?
August
2017..........................................................................................p.53
Introduction

Now in its sixth year, an estimated 400,000, perhaps 500,000 Syrians have lost their lives in the course of the present and ongoing U.S. imperialist-led war in Syria. Five million have fled, most seeking refuge in neighboring Middle East countries and Europe. The beleaguered refugees represent nearly one-quarter of the pre-war population of 21 million. Another 6.3 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes and likewise live in terrible conditions as internal refugees.

The Syrian protests in mid-2011 began as largely peaceful Damascus-area demonstrations of poor peasants, students and small layers of disenchanted capitalist elements. These were widely seen as part of the Arab Spring mass mobilizations for democratic and basic economic rights in the Middle East at that time. But they rapidly devolved into a full-scale war when Saudi Arabia and Qatar-financed reactionary forces joined with small groups of armed Syrian jihadist/terrorists, all with the full knowledge, complicity and aid of the U.S. and Turkey, to fundamentally transform the initial anti-Bashar Assad protests into the imperialist-abetted horror that has ensued. Indeed, in 2011, in the context of the still white hot U.S. interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya the immediate prospect of yet another U.S. war of intervention, this one in Syria, was a near universal antiwar movement assumption. “U.S. Hands Off Syria” was the united rallying cry at that time.

But today, the very nature of the ongoing and bloody Syrian war is hotly debated in the United States and around the world. Traditional antiwar and social justice forces are starkly divided, in part accounting for the present terribly demobilized state of the U.S. antiwar movement. The expected corporate media demonization of the Bashar Assad Syrian government, coupled with the U.S. government-promoted fiction, until recently, that the U.S. was not involved with on-the-ground forces, further accounts for the tragic absence of mass mobilizations against this U.S.-abetted, financed and organized war of mass destruction and intended future domination.
Those that unfortunately contribute to this state of antiwar movement de-mobilization argue that the war in Syria is in essence a civil war between a corrupt Syrian dictatorship led by President Assad on the one hand and the great mass of Syrian people demanding basic democratic rights on the other. This view parallels the formal position of the U.S. government that demands “regime change,” crystalized in their repeated refrain, “Assad must go.”

It is rare indeed for the U.S. government to demand that any dictator, anywhere in the world, depart from the scene. History repeatedly demonstrates the opposite – that U.S. administrations find common cause with all varieties of reactionary regimes provided only that their dictators guarantee U.S. interests.

Early on, U.S. intervention included the 2012-13 formation of the U.S.-orchestrated Syrian “government-in-exile” – the now abandoned Syrian National Council – and an associated organized and armed “coalition” of interveners including NATO, the various Gulf State monarchies and key jihadist/terrorist forces that they directly or indirectly armed and financed. Among these were ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and its later Syrian offshoot, the Al Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front, today renamed for public relations purposes, Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS/Organization for the Liberation of the Levant). So blatant and increasingly isolated and discredited are the involvement of these jihadist/terrorist groups that the Trump administration in July 2017 formally disassociated itself from them, while arrogantly admitting that the U.S. and its “coalition” allies had been for at least the past four years their main covert economic and military enablers.

Thus, while the U.S. “covert” war has been “officially” terminated, today an overt war with increasing numbers of U.S. ground troops, Special Operation/C.I.A. forces and even NGOs are actively engaged in Syria – complimented by a 24/7 U.S. Air Force-imposed “no fly zone” aimed at “protecting” key areas in Syria where the now largely defeated “rebels,” previously occupying almost two-thirds of Syria’s land surface, continue to hold sway.

U.S. admitted aid to these “rebels,” to the tune of at least $1 billion annually over the past 4-5 years, as well as additional
$billions freely flowing from NATO, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is aimed at the overthrow of the Assad government. The initial and central agency for this objective was the imperialist-backed jihadist groups in the region – the same forces that were simultaneously designated as terrorist. To substantiate this often veiled thesis, this Socialist Action pamphlet draws in part on material from the corporate “newspaper of record,” The New York Times, thus providing “from the “horse’s mouth” so to speak, a detailed account of the direct role of the U.S. and its allied forces in Syria.

Having established the previously-denied and now-confirmed factual record of the transpired events over the past six years, the author proffers a Marxist view of the applicability to Syria of the historic principle of the right to self-determination of poor and oppressed nations. This principle includes Syria’s right to seek the aid of other nations and forces, including Iran, Russia and the Lebanese-based Hezbollah, regardless of their separate and questionable motivations, to help counter the U.S.-led imperialist onslaught.

Socialists have always defended the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, that is, to be free from imperialist/colonial domination and occupation even if these nations are led by capitalist tyrants. Indeed, socialists are always advocates of the defeat of imperialist interveners and would-be colonizers of poor nations. Their forced withdrawal can only help facilitate the future struggles of that nation’s working masses to effectively challenge their native capitalist exploiters. In this regard we stand for the defeat of all U.S. imperialist and allied forces in Syria today without extending any political support to the capitalist Assad government. These positions are best advanced by antiwar forces today with the demands, “U.S. Out Now! and Self-determination for Syria!” A serious challenge to Assad’s capitalist government can only emerge with the organization of conscious forces inside Syria itself who repudiate and reject any and all support from the U.S. government and its allies and who set themselves upon an independent course aimed at constructing a mass revolutionary socialist party deeply imbedded in all the struggles of Syria’s working masses and in alliance with all others
in the region who oppose imperialist war and intervention. The five chronologically-presented articles herein were previously published in Socialist Action newspaper over the course of the past two years. They represent a valuable contribution to an understanding the dynamics of the still-unfolding events in Syria today.

David Jones
St. Paul, Minnesota
September 2017
U.S. imperialism’s Syria strategy
January 18, 2016
By Jeff Mackler

U.S. Major General Michael Nagata was unceremoniously removed some two months ago after his $500 million Syrian assignment to train by the end of the year a projected 5400 Syrian infantrymen to supposedly fight ISIS (Islamic State of Syria and Iraq) “languished in complications,” according to U.S. News and World Report. This project “ultimately yielded a force of fewer than 60, most of whom were immediately captured or voluntarily surrendered their U.S.-provided military equipment to extremist groups. Nagata’s program, aimed at training 15,000 such fighters over the next three years, was similarly abandoned.

The Oct. 9 New York Times article entitled, “Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,” states, “Obama’s reversal of policy underscored a harsh reality: tens of billions of dollars spent in recent years to train security forces across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia have rarely succeeded in transforming local fighters into effective, long-term armies.”

Today, after four and half years of U.S. “training of security forces,” supposedly to defeat ISIS, some two-thirds of Syria, mostly thinly-populated areas, is under the control of one or another jihadist group—either the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front, the Islamic State (ISIS) itself, or other Islamist groups. [Note: Today, August 2017, most of these areas are under the control of the Syrian government. Ed.] Virtually all are directly, indirectly or covertly armed and financed by U.S. imperialism, its NATO allies, the Saudi government (and “private” Saudi billionaires), Qatar, the United Arab Emirates or other Gulf State monarchies.

In place of this failed program the Obama administration recently announced a “new program” where, “for the first time the Pentagon is providing lethal aid directly to Syrian rebels, though the C.I.A. has for some time been covertly training and arming groups fighting Mr. Assad” (emphasis added).
Disappearance of “moderate rebels”

U.S. officials have also been compelled to admit, according to the British-based Independent journalist Robert Fisk, that Syria’s so-called moderate anti-Assad forces do not exist. “American officials,” Fisk writes, “… claim that the Syrian Army does not fight ISIS. If true, who on earth killed the 56,000 Syrian [Army] soldiers—the statistic an official secret, but nonetheless true—who have so far died in the Syrian war? The preposterous Free Syrian Army (FSA)?”

Fisk continues: “This rubbish has reached its crescendo in the on-again off-again saga of the Syrian ‘moderates’ who were originally military defectors to the FSA, which America and European countries regarded as a possible pro-Western force to be used against the Syrian government army. But the FSA fell to pieces, corrupted, and the ‘moderates’ defected all over again, this time to the Islamist Nusra Front or to ISIS, selling their American-supplied weapons to the highest bidder or merely retiring quietly.”

Fisk, cites a recent public meeting where “[General] David Petraeus, former No. 2 in Baghdad—announced recently that the [Syrian]‘moderates’ had collapsed long ago.”

“But within hours of Russia’s air assaults,” says Fisk, “… the Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN, the poor old BBC and just about every newspaper in the Western world resurrected these ghosts and told us that the Russkies were bombing the brave ‘moderates’ fighting Assad’s army in Syria—the very ‘moderates’ who, according to the same storyline from the very same sources a few weeks earlier, no longer existed.”

Background to the Syrian war

Four and half years ago, in 2011, during the various uprisings that constituted the Arab Spring, which began with mass popular rebellions that toppled the U.S.-backed Tunisian dictatorship of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali and then the U.S.-backed 30-year Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak,
the U.S. government embarked on its own “regime change” efforts in Libya and Syria.

We have carefully documented in the pages of this newspaper [Socialist Action] the horrors attendant to these U.S. imperialist interventions in the Middle East and beyond, beginning with the still ongoing U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter now the longest war in U.S. history. Without exception, all have been the product of a U.S. imperialist system in its deepest crisis in the modern era with no resolution in sight other than at the expense of the world’s oppressed peoples and nations and the working class masses in the U.S. itself.

It is in the above context of virtually endless U.S. wars and interventions that have taken the lives of literally millions in the Middle East that any serious assessment of the present situation in Syria can best be understood.

With U.S. imperialism’s assisted rollback of the Arab Spring revolutionary tide in Egypt and with the Gadhafi “regime change” in Libya via a U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” that slaughtered thousands under its belt, the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad was placed dead center in the U.S. imperial gun sights.

When Assad ordered his army to fire on a series of peaceful mass mobilizations in 2011 aimed at challenging his government’s imposition of severe neo-liberal austerity measures that especially offended Syria’s poor peasantry and layers of the middle class as well as leading bourgeois opposition figures, a dynamic was set in motion for yet another U.S. intervention—the sixth such war initiated, supported, or continued under the auspices of the Obama administration.

As in Libya, the U.S. moved to establish a Syrian government-in-exile while arming and financing the short-lived and largely exile-based “Free Syrian Army” headed by a handful of defecting Syrian Army officers. In conjunction with the deep popular outrage at Assad’s repression and austerity measures, top U.S. planners expected a quick rout of Assad’s armed forces and the establishment of a new regime to the liking of both U.S. imperialism and its anticipated bourgeois allies inside Syria. The ever-present threat of yet another U.S. intervention to back such a
“regime change” scenario was also an important factor in imperialist expectations that Assad would be forced to exit post-haste.

The absence of any significant organized socialist forces on the ground to pose a coherent working class-based strategy for the Syrian masses to defend and advance their own interests as opposed to Assad’s or those of a would-be U.S.-sponsored and imposed capitalist order weighed heavily against any positive outcome for the Syria’s working masses. Given the historic failure of past bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist parties to effectively challenge imperialist prerogatives in Syria and far beyond, history has exacted a terrible toll on Syria’s initially hopeful and promising Arab Spring.

But in the absence of anything resembling a revolutionary leadership, the democratic and popular thrust of the anti-Assad mobilizations rapidly dissipated. This tragic void was inevitably filled by an assortment of reactionary, mostly religious-fundamentalist-jihadist, forces backed by U.S. imperialism and/or its reactionary regional allies, especially in Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

**ISIS’s main pillars of support in Syria**

The U.S.-allied Saudis and the Turks today account for the lion’s share of ISIS’s finances and weapons—undoubtedly with the full knowledge of the U.S. government. The reactionary Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a U.S. NATO ally, still controls important portions of its southern border with Syria and utilizes these as central corridors for the entrance of thousands of international ISIS fighters to Syria to depose the Assad government. In the same manner over 1000 trucks from ISIS-controlled oil fields in northern Syria serve as the main conduit for ISIS-smuggled oil into Turkey. In those Turkish-Syrian border areas under the control of the oppressed Kurdish people the flow of ISIS fighters has been significantly thwarted.

An Oct. 10 New York Times editorial provides a glimpse of how ISIS operates. In the article, entitled, “Why Is Money Still Flowing to ISIS?,” The Times estimates ISIS revenues from the
sale of Syrian oil at $40 million monthly. “The Islamic State is also
looting banks; demanding ransom from kidnap victims; engaging
in human trafficking; selling off plundered antiquities; and leaning
on private donors, mainly in Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia”
(emphasis added). That these “private donors” include Saudi
billionaires and members of the ruling Saudi government is not a
fact that Times reporters bother to mention, although The Times
does estimate ISIS annual revenues at $1 billion.

While the United Nations formally maintains lists of scores
of people and organizations designated as financial supporters of
terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, U.S. officials have
noted that “enforcement has been inconsistent in some cases.”
More to the point, the Dec. 4 New York Times notes, “There is
already extensive evidence of transfers from wealthy donors in the
Persian Gulf in particular, but few concrete penalties.”

In the same article, David Andrew Weinberg, a senior
fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a
Washington advocacy group, states, “There is still so much
reticence to actually engage in that naming and shaming [of groups
that fund terrorists] that this [new UN resolution] has limited
impact.”

Similarly, a UN resolution that bans any nation from
assisting in the smuggling of ISIS-controlled oil is ignored with
impunity. Thus, the evidence that key U.S. allies are active
accomplices in funding or otherwise supporting ISIS and/or
organizing troops to directly overthrow the Assad government is
acknowledged by virtually all sources from the UN to the New
York Times and beyond.

With regard to bombing ISIS’s oil refineries, The Times
delicately notes and with perhaps an ounce of disbelief, “Concerns
about leaving local citizens without crucial refining facilities and
with the daunting job of rebuilding them later may be tempering
the American [bombing] approach, some experts say” (emphasis
added). The word “tempering” is in fact a euphemism for leaving
these oil facilities largely intact in order to support, in a
“tempered” manner to be sure, ISIS’s anti-Assad objectives.
More recently, top U.S. military officials have announced policy changes with regard to bombing ISIS-controlled oil refineries. Until mid-November the “official” U.S. policy was to limit bombing or degrading of these facilities to inflicting minor damage only—damage that could be easily repaired within a matter of weeks or months. “Until Monday,” according to The New York Times of Nov. 16, “the United States refrained from striking the fleet used to transport oil, believed to include more than 1000 tanker trucks, because of concerns about causing civilian casualties. As a result, the Islamic State’s distribution system for exporting oil had remained largely intact.” Largely intact!

Today, U.S. policy has purportedly shifted to inflicting a modicum of greater damage on ISIS oil fields in Syria—at least this is what U.S. officials state for the record!

Meanwhile, Turkey has been more than content to stand by, if not assist in, the ISIS slaughter of Kurdish fighters in Kobani and elsewhere. The Turkish government prefers the massacre of its oppressed Kurdish population by ISIS to the Kurds’ advancing their historic struggle for national liberation and self-determination. But the Kurdish leadership, which mistakenly accepts support from the U.S., nevertheless repeatedly states that their objective is self-determination for a future Kurdistan and not the removal of the Assad government.

Conflicting interests among U.S. allies

There is little doubt that the special regional interests of all U.S.-allied nations, from Turkey to the Gulf State oil monarchies, NATO, as well as Israel, play a role in the present Syrian and related Middle East wars. But these interests are invariably subordinate to those of the dominant and only world superpower—U.S. imperialism.

Both the Saudis and Israelis bitterly complained when the Obama administration signed the recent nuclear accords with Iran. The Saudis were not pleased when the U.S. stood mute when it bombed Yemen to smithereens, although the U.S. secretly supplied the Saudi military with the intelligence to do so. In all these instances, and several others, there are undoubtedly conflicting
interests, with the U.S. preferring to resume, for example, its long-interrupted exploitation of Iranian oil while the Saudis see Shiite Iran as a rival for financial and political influence in the region.

Today, as the U.S. purports to increase bombing of ISIS oil facilities, the Saudis do the opposite and cease its essentially minimal or token bombing of ISIS, instead turning Saudi air power to its ongoing slaughter in Yemen. In the same vein, Turkey idly stands by, if not assists, as ISIS slaughters the Kurds, while U.S. military policymakers, for their own imperial reasons to be sure, aim their airpower at ISIS in “support” of Kurds. But again, these realities on the ground are fundamentally subordinate to the greater aims and objectives of the U.S. imperial behemoth. No one would deny, for example, that the U.S. has not at any time in history ever supported the historic struggle of the Kurdish people to reunite their long imperialist-divided Kurdish nation.

An insightful Dec. 3 New York Times article entitled “Germany Rebukes Its Own Intelligence Agency for Criticizing Saudi Policy” makes this clear. The article begins: “The German government issued an unusual public rebuke to its own foreign intelligence service on Thursday over a blunt memo stating that Saudi Arabia was playing an increasingly destabilizing role in the Middle East.”

The secret memo, leaked by sources inside the German agency, the BND, noted: “Saudi rivalry with Iran for supremacy in the Middle East, as well as Saudi dependency on the United States, were the main drivers of Saudi foreign policy.” And further, this embarrassing memo, repudiated by the Angela Merkel government, stated: “In Syria, Saudi Arabia’s aim was always to oust President Bashar al-Assad, and that has not changed” (emphasis added).

We should add here that the French move to bomb ISIS is not without its limitations. The New York Times aptly notes: “While France has been conducting scores of airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq, it has been bombing inside Syria only sparingly, wary of inadvertently strengthening the hand of President Bashar al-Assad by killing his enemies.”
Imperialism’s major policy shift

The recent Russian intervention in Syria at the request of the Assad government has convinced virtually all that Assad’s immediate removal is no longer on the order of the day. Hence, we see all the anti-Assad forces, governments, their patrons and the like scurrying to conferences around the world to patch together diverse and sometimes warring coalitions to eventually meet in negotiations with the Assad government to partake in the determination of Syria’s future.

This unfolding worldwide U.S.-orchestrated “negotiations” scene constitutes a grotesque imperialist spectacle that tragically replicates almost all previous U.S. maneuvers to determine the future composition of governments that it has or seeks to remove. Literally hundreds of parties, all favored to one degree or another by U.S. imperialism and its allies, meet in conferences today that are virtually presided over by Secretary of State John Kerry, and/or other top U.S. officials, to determine who will get what in a future Syria.

The latest U.S.-orchestrated gambit unfolded during a two-day conference in Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital. Entitled, “Syrian Rebels Form Bloc for New Round of Peace Talks,” the Dec. 10 New York Times describes it well: ”An array of Syrian opposition groups agreed here on Thursday to form a new and more inclusive body to guide the diverse and divided opponents of President Bashad al-Assad in a new round of planned talks aimed at ending the Syrian civil war.

“The formation of such a body has been seen by the United States and the opposition’s other international supporters as a prerequisite for new talks, and the new body appeared to fit the bill by pulling together political dissidents who have long distrusted one another as well as rebel groups fighting the Syrian Army. ‘This is the widest participation for the opposition, inside and outside of Syria, and we have the participation of the armed groups,’ said Hadi al-Bakra, a member of the exiled Syrian National Coalition who attended the two-day conference that produced the new body.”
(We should note here that the Kurds rejected participation at the Riyadh conference and instead organized their own meeting in Kurdish-occupied regions. None of the participants advocated the Assad government’s removal. In some of these Kurdish areas the Assad government continues to pay the salaries of Kurdish officials—a détente of sorts.)

The Riyadh conference signaled a major shift in the orientation of U.S. imperialism and its allies over the past five years. Previously, all such conferences were premised on the understanding that the Assad government must fall via the military actions of all its opponents, including those armed and financed by the U.S.

Today, this equation has dramatically changed in that the Assad government is expected by all to have a prime seat at the scheduled late January [2016 Editor] negotiating sessions. That is, assuming the present U.S./UN-brokered agreements hold, the U.S.-led effort to remove Assad by the application of military force, will be set aside in favor of a negotiated settlement with the Assad government representatives at one side of the “bargaining table” and the combined forces, yet to be specifically determined, of all U.S.-allied forces in all their reactionary manifestations, on the other.

**Right of oppressed nations to self-determination**

The right to self-determination of oppressed nations, historically trampled on by imperialist conquerors and colonizers over the past several centuries, applies with full force to Syria today. It applies to all oppressed nations regardless of the qualities or class nature of their leadership.

From the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, and long before, the defeat of the imperialist, colonial oppressor has always been central to revolutionary internationalist working-class politics even if the oppressed nation was led by feudal monarchs.

U.S. imperialist war and intervention today represents nothing less than the crystallization and ruthless application of the
ruling-class power of an American capitalism in crisis—a crisis so deep that the imperialist beast is compelled to send its armies, privatized death squads, drones, and surrogates everywhere on earth to advance its interests.

Today, U.S. imperialism is focused on the Middle East, where its multiple wars against the oppressed people and nations have wrought untold death and destruction. Yet, U.S. policy in that oil-rich region remains in an advanced state of disarray. Having conquered Iraq with military force virtually unequalled in the modern era, the establishment of a stable regime that can guarantee U.S. control of that nation’s vast fossil fuel resources remains in question. The latest tyrant that the U.S. installed to replace the universally discredited, Nouri al-Maliki regime, Haider al-Abadi, fears that Iraq’s military and political association with the U.S. can only outrage vast portions of its population, which have experienced first hand the horrors unleashed by the U.S. military machine. Indeed, it is widely accepted that past U.S. policies in Iraq, including massive corruption, the purge of all Sunnis from the army and public positions, and the generalized persecution of the minority Sunni population, laid the foundations for the emergence of ISIS.

In the wake of virtually all U.S. Middle East wars over the past decade and longer, “failed states” have been the inevitable outcome. In Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan, death and destruction and endless internecine wars waged by competing tribal-based reactionary groups are accompanied by almost unbelievable human suffering—poverty, disease and starvation—U.S. imperialism’s trademark and legacy for whomever it conquers.

Again, unconditional support to the right of self-determination of all oppressed nations, free from all imperialist intervention in all its manifestations, is a central and strategic component of revolutionary socialist politics.

Having affirmed this fundamental working-class principle, support to self-determination is not at all synonymous with political support to the governments or regimes of these oppressed nations—in the case of Syria, the Bashar al-Assad government. Socialists have no illusions that the Assad regime represents any form of revolutionary nationalist or otherwise progressive break with capitalism.
Neither do we hold that the Assad government strives to achieve an egalitarian society that advances the interests of the working class and peasant majority as against Syria’s capitalist elite.

Nevertheless, the removal of Assad’s oppressive capitalist Syrian regime is the sole responsibility of the Syrian people, not U.S. imperialism and its reactionary NATO-allied and Gulf State monarchy forces.

Socialist Action’s unanimously adopted 2014 national convention Political Resolution [reaffirmed at its 2016 National Convention. Editor] makes this absolutely clear: “Today’s war in Syria is a war between U.S. imperialism’s direct and indirect capitalist-fundamentalist and reactionary forces on the one hand and the capitalist Assad government on the other. The Syria masses have no independently organized political, military or economic presence. Under these circumstances, Socialist Action stands full square against U.S. imperialism and those allied with it in Syria and elsewhere. In accord with our support to the right of self-determination of all oppressed nations, even those under capitalist rule, we are for the defeat of the U.S.-backed imperialist intervention in all its forms.” The resolution continues: “We oppose U.S. direct aid to the FSA or its indirect support or acquiescence to ISIS, through U.S. surrogates in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or anywhere else. In the U.S. this translates into our full support of the key demand and the actions called by the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) to “End All U.S. Intervention In Syria!”

Socialists include in this strategic orientation the absolute necessity of Syrian workers and peasants, however difficult and distant under the present circumstances, to struggle to form their own independent fighting revolutionary socialist parties aimed not only at opposing all imperialist wars, including in Syria, but at establishing socialist societies where capitalist exploitation and oppression are forever ended.
Syria’s right to seek allies against imperialist intervention

Syria’s right to self-determination necessarily includes the right of the Syrian government to seek and accept the support of the militia fighters that are today defending Syria against imperialist intervention in several of its manifestations. These include fighters from Lebanon, that is, the forces of Hezbollah, who defeated the last Israeli invasion of their country, and the Shiite militias from Iran, who, in the past, joined with Shiite fighters in Iraq to challenge the U.S. invasion and war against that nation.

In a similar vein, the agreements recently signed by Syria with Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia to share intelligence information in fighting ISIS, al-Qaeda and all other groups aimed at removing the Assad government, including the 13-nation U.S. imperialist-led “coalition,” fall squarely within Syria’s right to self-determination. This includes Syria’s agreement to accept Russian air, naval, and related military support to accomplish the same end.

President Obama has repeatedly asserted that U.S. war aims in Syria are “strategically” opposed to those of the Russians. U.S. imperialism has been organized for almost five years to overthrow the Assad regime. Whatever its motives, the Russians are in Syria at the behest of the Syrian government, not to overthrow it.

Undoubtedly, the Russian capitalist government of Vladimir Putin has its own reasons for accepting Syria’s invitation to intervene, including NATO’s increasing encroachment on its borders and the U.S. and European Union economic sanctions. Revolutionary socialists suffer no illusions that capitalist Russia can serve as Syria’s strategic ally in the present war. Indeed, the Putin government has consistently and cynically offered itself as a mediator in the Syrian war, repeatedly proposing a “negotiated solution” wherein all parties, including U.S. imperialism and its NATO allies, as well as the Saudis and others, will collectively decide Syria’s fate.

Following Putin’s private talks with John Kerry, Putin remarked, “We have an understanding how we should proceed if we talk about a political settlement. We need to work on a new
[Syrian] constitution, new elections and the control over their outcome” (emphasis added). Thus, Putin’s cynical mindset, as with his U.S. negotiating counterparts, includes his thesis that Syria’s fate is to be determined not by the Syrian people but by the deals brokered by others, indeed, by deals whose “outcome” is “controlled” in advance.

At least for the moment, however, Russia on the one hand and U.S. imperialism on the other are on opposite sides of a U.S. imperialist-led war against the poor and oppressed Syrian nation. Russia is no newcomer to “deals” in the Middle East. It gave its assent to the U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” against Libya that essentially destroyed that country. Revolutionary socialists should indeed expect Russia to include at the “negotiating” table the advancement of its own interests even if these are at odds with those of the Syrian people.

Yet Russia’s actions in driving ISIS and related pro-U.S. forces farther from the government-held Damascus capital and surrounding regions has undoubtedly altered the calculus of imperialism’s previous equation, that is, the military conquest of Syria and the imposition of a new regime directly beholden to U.S. imperialist interests. Perhaps now, given the reality on the ground that the Assad government has not been obliterated, as originally planned, the outcome will be perhaps somewhat less onerous with regard to Syria. Socialists cannot be neutral in such matters.

Similarly, with the Russian air force entry into Syria, the various “no-fly zones” previously contemplated by the Obama administration and formally proposed by leading Democrats (Hillary Clinton) and Republicans are today excluded. Clinton herself stated bluntly that with the Russian entry this overt U.S.-imposed “no-fly zone” option was no longer a viable option.

The tragedy of Syria today

We are nevertheless compelled to recognize that any “negotiated settlement” to the imperialist-led war against Syrian cannot be expected to represent a lasting gain for the Syrian people. Absent a powerful revolutionary force on the field of action to effectively challenge both the imperialist intervention and
pose a working-class alternative to the Assad regime, the likely outcome will be some variant of an imperialist-imposed “regime change”—as opposed to an outright imperialist-led conquest and occupation of Syria, the latter being the original and now apparently thwarted, for the time being at least, intention of the U.S. warmakers.

The Russian intervention may well have prevented the overt marching of reactionary jihadist/religious fundamentalist groups or other imperialist-allied forces into Damascus with a resulting Libyan-type chaos, anarchy, and bloodbath to follow. Historic tragedy has a habit of unfolding in a myriad of forms—some less devastating than others. Here we have a distinction, perhaps with a significant difference, in that the opportunities for future Syrian anti-capitalist struggles may become somewhat improved.

Antiwar and social justice fighters can best help to tilt the scale in favor of Syria’s people and future class-struggle fighters by building the most powerful U.S. movement possible demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. military aid and forces in all their manifestations from Syria. Removing the imperialist boot from Syria and the Middle East more generally best opens the door for the oppressed masses to resume their struggle.

U.S. out now! Self-determination for Syria!
When a June 16 New York Times front-page article blared, “51 U.S. Diplomats Urge Strikes Against Assad in Syria,” I could almost hear the war drums beating at the U.S. State Department and White House. These “mid-level diplomats,” with varying U.S. government Syria assignments over the years, “urged the United States to carry out military strikes against the government of President Bashar al-Assad to stop its persistent violations of a cease-fire in the country’s five-year-old civil war.”

Both the U.S. government and its diplomats charge that Russia’s “violations” consist in targeting U.S.-backed and funded terrorist groups aimed at overthrowing the Assad government. Heaven of heavens! Unlike the U.S. government and its reactionary allies in the region, and NATO, neither the Russians nor the Syrian government distinguish between U.S.-organized and fostered terrorists like the Al Qaida-affiliated Al Nusra Front and ISIS. Both group and its offshoots are funded and/or abetted by one or another U.S. imperialist allies in the region, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the other Gulf monarchies as well as NATO, while the U.S., not too secretly these days as we shall see below, turns a blind eye to the Nusra Front, whose forces freely intermingle with and regularly collaborate with U.S.-armed groups aimed at Assad’s removal.

The “51” called for a “a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hard-nosed U.S.-led diplomatic process.” This “judicious” U.S. air war, essentially a “no fly zone,” would signal a direct confrontation with the Russians, who presumably would be given the option to have their aircraft “stand off” or be shot down.

In September 2015, Russia accepted the Syrian government’s request to intervene against the ISIS and the Nusra Front/Al Qaida terrorist attacks, not to mention against the attacks of the 1400 armed militias organized by the Saudis, Qataris and their allies, and the tens of thousands of armed jihadi fighters that joined
the effort as they freely filtered though Turkish borders with Turkish government aid and approval (see The New York Times editorial of June 29, 2016). The fact that Al Nusra is formally on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations is ignored when its terror is directed against the Syrian government.

While these diplomats employ the polite language of their trade, few would deny that their recommended “hard-nosed” and “stand off” use of “air weapons” signals nothing less than a potential military confrontation with Russia, an existential confrontation that may not exclude a nuclear war.

With the commencement of Russia’s bombing of any and all terrorist groups in Syria, there has been no “diplomatic” agreement of just who is to be bombed, or better, which terrorist organizations are to be bombed. The “51” memo argues that unless a U.S. air war is contemplated, “Mr. Assad will feel no pressure to negotiate with the moderate opposition or other factions fighting him.” Note the delicate reference to “other factions,” that is, as we will see below, Saudi and U.S.-armed factions hired to do imperialism’s bidding.

What began in Syria in 2011 with mass peaceful protests against the neoliberal austerity measures imposed by the capitalist Bashar al-Assad government, undoubtedly and initially a promising and welcome component of the Arab Spring mobilizations that challenged the status quo in the region, rapidly devolved into a U.S. and allied imperialist war aimed at “regime change” American style. The Assad government’s firing on peaceful demonstrators proved to be the perfect pretext to accomplish in Syria what the U.S./NATO “humanitarian” and “regime change” war did in Libya. That one-year onslaught leveled the Libyan nation’s infrastructure and murdered tens of thousands.

While The Times argued in its June 16 article that “there is little evidence that the Obama administration has plans to change course” and that it “has emphasized the military campaign against the Islamic State over efforts to dislodge Mr. Assad,” the opposite has been the case. The very next day a Times headline read that “[Secretary of State] John Kerry Is Said to Side With Diplomats’ Critical Memo on Syria.”
With the Russia intervention a year ago, along with the Iranian militias and Hezbollah fighters, U.S. imperialism’s fortunes in Syria have been significantly diminished. Large swaths of the country, including important cities previously under ISIS or Al Qaida control, have been retaken by Syrian government forces. It is in this context that the “51” memo can best be understood.

**Classified C.I.A. reports reveal U.S. war aims**

The corporate media-promoted fiction that the central U.S. military target in Syria is ISIS, and not a U.S.-imposed regime change to remove Assad, is belied by the facts. A June 26 New York Times article entitled “C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say” asserts: “The theft of only a small portion of the U.S. weapons bound for Syria and stolen by corrupt Jordanian officials highlights... the messy, unplanned consequences of programs to arm and train rebels—the kind of programs the C.I.A. and Pentagon have conducted for decades—even after the Obama administration had hoped to keep the training program in Jordan under tight control.”

The Times continues, “The United States and Saudi Arabia are the biggest contributors [in Syria], with the Saudis contributing both weapons and large sums of money, and with C.I.A. paramilitary operatives taking the lead in training the rebels to use Kalashnikovs, mortars, antitank guided missiles and other weapons.”

And further, “The existence of the program is classified as are all details about its budget. American officials say that the C.I.A. has trained thousands of rebels in the past three years, and that the fighters made substantial advances on the battlefield against Syrian government forces until Russian military forces—launched last year in support of Mr. Assad—compelled them to retreat.”

And again the NYT adds, “The training program is based in Jordan because of the country’s proximity to the Syrian battlefields. From the beginning, the C.I.A. and the Arab intelligence agencies relied on Jordanian security services to transport the weapons, many bought in bulk in the Balkans and elsewhere around Eastern Europe.”
The Times continues, “The program is separate from one that the Pentagon set up to train rebels to combat Islamic State fighters, rather than the Syrian military. That program was shut down after it managed to train only a handful of Syrian rebels.” Indeed, the figure is estimated at five rebels! The remainder of these U.S.-trained anti-ISIS fighters literally turned over their U.S. weapons to ISIS and/or to groups fighting Assad. Others just quit or joined ISIS or the Al Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front.

Further exploding the myth that “Syrian moderates” were leading the fight against Assad, The Times reveals that “President Obama authorized the covert arming program in April 2013, after more than a year of debate inside the administration about the wisdom of using the C.I.A. to train rebels trying to oust Mr. Assad.”

And finally, “The decision was made in part to try to gain control of a chaotic situation in which Arab countries were funneling arms into Syria for various rebel groups with little coordination. The Qatars had paid to smuggle shipments of Chinese-made FN-6 shoulder-fired weapons over the border from Turkey, and Saudi Arabia sent thousands of Kalashnikovs and millions of rounds of ammunition it had bought, sometimes with the C.I.A.’s help. By late 2013, the C.I.A. was working directly with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other nations to arm and train small groups of rebels and send them across the border into Syria.”

I couldn’t help but note the hypocrisy of these “51” diplomats concluding their recommendation for an air war against the Assad government by asserting, “It is time that the United States, guided by our strategic interests and moral convictions, lead a global effort to put an end to this conflict once and for all.” Could it be that these “moral” diplomats were unaware that almost from day one of the Syrian events, the deadly hands of U.S. imperialism and its allies were revved up to prepare for Assad’s removal?

Indeed, six months earlier, a January 23, 2016, Times article entitled, “U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels” essentially reported the same information, but with regard to Saudi Arabia, stating, “When President Obama secretly
authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to begin arming Syria’s embattled rebels in 2013, the spy agency knew it would have a willing partner to help pay for the covert operation. It was the same partner the C.I.A. has relied on for decades for money and discretion in far-off conflicts: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

“Since then,” the article continues, “the C.I.A. and its Saudi counterpart have maintained an unusual arrangement for the rebel-training mission, which the Americans have code-named Timber Sycamore. Under the deal, current and former administration officials said, the Saudis contribute both weapons and large sums of money, and the C.I.A takes the lead in training the rebels on AK-47 assault rifles and tank-destroying missiles.”

And finally we are informed that “The support for the Syrian rebels is only the latest chapter in the decades long relationship between the spy services of Saudi Arabia and the United States, an alliance that has endured through the Iran-contra scandal, support for the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan and proxy fights in Africa. Sometimes, as in Syria, the two countries have worked in concert. In others, Saudi Arabia has simply written checks underwriting American covert activities.”

To fuel the drive to increase U.S. and allied imperialist intervention in Syria, we are once again witness to a demonization campaign, this time directed at President Assad, who is charged by the “51,” and a host of other imperialist warmongers, of violating all the so-called cease-fire agreements negotiated in February, including denying food shipments to “starving people” in Darya—a suburb outside of Damascus—and of bombing U.S.-backed rebels who are supposedly fighting ISIS. Headlines screamed in late June that Assad had promised to retake “every inch” of his country from his invading foes.

**Imperialist morality!**

Dare we assert that the imperialist-occupied portions of Syria—at one point some 50 percent or more of the country—represent a fundamental violation of the right of oppressed nations to self-determination? Here we are reminded of the rueful refrain of antiwar activists during the period when 500,000 U.S. troops for
10 years rained death and destruction on Vietnam, murdering four million people, mostly civilians. “We must teach the Vietnamese not to invade the land they were born in!”

We must teach Assad to never say that he is intent on retaking Syria from the imperialist invaders! We must bomb that nation to smithereens until the Assad government agrees to the imperialist propositions laid out by the U.S.-constituted and Saudi-led coalition of every imperialist backed force—almost all external to Syria—31 groups to date, that seek a piece of Syria!

Dare we comment on the alleged starvation of the people in cities previously taken over by U.S.-backed terrorist groups and today surrounded by Assad’s forces? Do these include the “rebel”-controlled Damascus suburbs from which U.S. and Saudi-backed terrorists had been daily lobbing bombs and rockets into Damascus? Should we side with ISIS forces who have been expelled from Palmyra and are now fleeing? Or the similar forces in the northern city of Aleppo? Should we lend credibility to confirmed reports that the “cease fire” had been used by U.S.-backed “rebels” to re-arm themselves? On this latter point, the evidence affirms Assad’s position.

A more accurate version of what is happening in the previously “rebel-controlled” Aleppo appeared in the Feb. 18 Boston Globe as an opinion piece by Brown University researcher Stephen Kinzer, who wrote: “Coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press. Reporting about carnage in the ancient city of Aleppo is the latest reason why.

“For three years, violent militants have run Aleppo. Their rule began with a wave of repression. They posted notices warning residents: ‘Don’t send your children to school. If you do, we will get the backpack and you will get the coffin.’ Then they destroyed factories, hoping that unemployed workers would have no recourse other than to become fighters. They trucked looted machinery to Turkey and sold it.”

Kinzer presents accounts that “Turkish-Saudi backed ‘moderate rebels’ showered the residential neighborhoods of Aleppo with unguided rockets and gas jars.”

Beware the “negotiated” settlement!
Today, at the behest of the U.S., the Saudi government was assigned to form a “High Negotiations Committee” supposedly to represent at the bargaining table all forces that seek the overthrow of the Syrian government—terrorists and U.S. stooges alike. There are no “progressive” or “moderate” forces in this imperialist cabal.

With the Russian intervention, again at the invitation of the Syrian government, the influence of U.S.-backed forces is declining, hence the heightened threats of a U.S. air war signaled by the “51” U.S. diplomats.

Today the UN reports that there are 65 million refugees and displaced people in the world, the great majority in the Middle East and Africa—almost all the victims of the chaos reigned on poor nations by the imperial powers, who seek the re-colonization of the planet by whatever means required. These include endless covert and overt wars, drone wars, privatized death squad wars and wars orchestrated by subservient U.S. allies.

**On Russian intervention**

The fact that the Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah interventions in Syria have thwarted U.S. regime change efforts, at least for the moment, is a plus for Syria regardless of Russian intentions. Syria’s right to self-determination, that is, its freedom from U.S. imperialist intervention, however constricted under the present circumstances, opens far greater opportunities for Syrians to rebuild and organize for their own class interests than under the imperialist boot.

While the Russian government has repeatedly indicated its willingness to partner with the U.S. in a brokered “negotiated” settlement wherein President Assad could be “peacefully transitioned” out of office, the objective effect of Russia’s intervention has been to weaken the imperialist grip on Syria. Such a defeat for the U.S. government would represent a significant gain for the Syrian masses.

Few doubt that the Vladimir Putin government is qualitatively less concerned with Syria’s right to self-determination than it is with Russia advancing its own interests, including privately seeking U.S. assurances to lessen the European Union
and U.S.-imposed sanctions on Russia imposed after the EU-U.S.-backed fascist-led coup in Ukraine and perhaps to diminish U.S. and NATO’s ongoing moves to place troops and nuclear weapons on Russia’s borders. While these are certainly vital and legitimate concerns of the beleaguered Russian state, my point here is also to be absolutely clear that while for capitalist Russia Syria’s right to self-determination is negotiable, for antiwar fighters in the U.S. and the world over it is not. Our starting point must be to reject any “right” of imperialism to impose any “negotiated settlement” on any oppressed nation.

Self-determination for Syria! U.S. Out Now! Abolish the U.S. war machine!
U.S. imperialist war in Syria
Acid test for antiwar movement
November 16, 2016
By Jeff Mackler

A Sept. 6 New York Times article reporting on President Obama’s press conference at the end of the Group of 20 conference in China caught my eye. Noting Obama’s planned visit to Laos, The Times commented: “The United States and Laos have a difficult relationship that dates to the C.I.A.’s undeclared war in the 1960s and ’70s, when American warplanes dropped 270 million bombs on this country, many of which are still buried in fields and forests.”

Two hundred-seventy million bombs in an undeclared CIA war on a country with only seven million people! President Obama went to Laos to, among other things, apologize. Former president Bill Clinton similarly apologized to Guatemala during his presidency for the CIA’s secret war supporting that nation’s dictatorship, which slaughtered 400,000 indigenous Guatemalans. There have been no apologies for the 10-year U.S. mass slaughter in Vietnam that murdered four million Vietnamese, mostly civilians and with poison gas, napalm and saturation bombing.

There have been no apologies for the secret U.S.-orchestrated coup that overthrew the elected Iranian government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and installed the Shah Reza Pahlavi monarchy. No apologies when the U.S.-financed the Saddam Hussein government’s 10-year war, 1980-88, against Iran when the Iranian masses overthrew that monarchy in 1979. One million Iranians died in that U.S.-abetted war.

Need we recount further the history of U.S. imperialism’s wars of annihilation, conquest, “regime change,” covert and overt? Was there one where the U.S. government stood on the side of humanity? One?
“In Somalia, U.S. Escalates a Shadow War,” was the title of an Oct. 16, 2016, New York Times article that read: “The Somalia campaign [where U.S. Special Forces bomb “terrorists” with impunity to protect alleged U.S. ‘national interests—J.M.] is a blueprint for warfare that President Obama has embraced and will pass along to his successor. It is a model the United States now employs across the Middle East and North Africa—from Syria to Libya—despite the president’s stated aversion to American ‘boots on the ground’ in the world’s war zones. This year alone, the United States has carried out airstrikes in seven countries and conducted Special Operations missions in many more.” (emphasis added).

But maybe Syria today is the exception to this “model.” Could it be that the combined forces of U.S. imperialism, NATO, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the rest of the Gulf State monarchies, are on the side of truth and justice in Syria? Are they there, as they claim, to protect the defenseless people of Aleppo from indiscriminate civilian bombing by the Bashar Assad government and Russia? This is the view of the corporate media that daily blares headlines that Assad and Russia are guilty of war crimes, of violations of international law, of starving civilian populations, of bombing courageous rebel fighters and civilians in a civil war with American truth and justice on one side and a Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah cabal of mass murderers on the other.

Tragically, it is also the view of a small section of so-called antiwar activists and socialist organizations who, to date, have failed to mount a single action against the U.S. war on Syria, a war that in all its fundamentals is indistinguishable from the U.S. wars in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and all the others.

But as with any new war, and they seem endless in the lexicon of U.S. atrocities, facts are invaluable in establishing what is actually taking place in Syria today. Curiously, my sources are from the chief propaganda voice and supposedly “internationally respected” New York Times. Much of the material, usually buried deep in the general pro-U.S. imperialist Times narrative, deals with the “negotiations” between the U.S. and Russia regarding the “rebel” evacuation of the northern city of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and commercial center until it was overrun by ISIS.
and the Al Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front. The latter is the U.S.-designated terrorist group whose forces, as we shall demonstrate, with the help of the New York Times, are inextricably linked to the U.S.-armed and financed “rebels.”

- “The rebels involved in the operation [in northern Syria] appeared to be mainly from the groups fighting to unseat Mr. Assad that the United States, Turkey and other allies support through a covert operations center in Turkey…” The Aug. 24 Times article continues: “Turkish officials were adamant that they would continue operations in Syria until they had neutralized what they see as threats against national security.”

Months earlier, The Times reported Pentagon figures that the flow of foreign [ISIS] fighters into Syria via Turkish-abetted corridors had been 2000 monthly. Turkey, in collaboration with the U.S., then sought the removal of the Syrian government of Bashar Assad.

- “The fighters attacking the [Syrian] regime from inside and outside Aleppo fought fiercely, knowing that this battle was a fateful one and would lift the siege on their families and children,” said Zakaria Malahifji, the political chief of a rebel group backed by the C.I.A. and its counterparts in European and Arab states” (New York Times, Aug. 12, 2016, emphasis added).

- “But spearheading the rebel effort were hard-line Islamist groups including the Levant Conquest Front, which has been affiliated with Al Qaeda for years and only recently changed its name and claimed to have become independent. While American officials dismissed the rebranding, saying the group did not change its ideology or its goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria, analysts said it allowed the jihadists to work more closely with other rebel groups, blurring the lines between them (New York Times, Aug. 25, 2016, emphasis added).

- “The jihadists’ prominent role in the Aleppo offensive showed that they remain militarily indispensable to the wider rebel
movement and increased their popularity at time when many Syrians [unnamed] criticize the United States for not doing more to protect Syrian civilians” (New York Times, Aug. 25, 2016).

- “The Nusra Front has been one of the most effective anti-Assad forces, and because of that United States-backed rebel groups often coordinate their activities with its units. Russia has argued that means that Washington is effectively supporting Nusra, and that the American-backed groups are legitimate targets. So a joint campaign against Nusra would not only appear to concede Russia’s point, but could also bring American firepower to bear against the strongest anti-Assad military force and a sometime partner of Washington’s allies” (New York Times, July 14, 2016, emphasis added).

- “Up to now, the United States has carried out occasional strikes against what have been described as senior Qaeda figures in Syria. But it has refrained from systematic attacks against the Nusra Front, whose ranks are heavily Syrian, including many who left less extreme rebel groups because Nusra was better armed and financed” (New York Times, July 14, 2016).

- “Faysal Itani, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, was also critical of the proposed military coordination with the Russians. He said that combined attacks against Nusra would effectively end the Syrian opposition, cementing Mr. Assad’s grip on power and enraging most Syrians” (New York Times, July 14, 2016, emphasis added).

- “The Syrian government and its allies have often referred to all rebel fighters as belonging to the Nusra Front, while opposition fighters have said that they will not renounce tactical alliances with the Qaeda-linked group without new arms [from the U.S., Turkey and the Gulf State monarchies] or guarantees” (New York Times, Oct. 18, 2016).

- “The new offensive [in Aleppo] was a strong sign that rebel groups vetted by the United States were continuing their tactical
alliances with groups linked to Al Qaeda, rather than distancing themselves as Russia has demanded and the Americans have urged. … The rebels argue that they cannot afford to shun any potential allies while they are under fire, including well-armed and motivated jihadists, without more robust aid from their international backers. … Those taking part in the offensive include the Levant Conquest Front, a militant group formerly known as the Nusra Front that grew out of Al Qaeda; another hard-line Islamist faction, Ahrar al-Sham; and other rebel factions fighting Mr. Assad that have been vetted by the United States and its allies” (“Syrian Rebels Launch Offensive to Break Siege of Aleppo,” by Hwaida Saad and Anne Barnard, New York Times, Oct. 28, 2016, emphasis added).

• The same article reports, “Eleven of the roughly 20 rebel groups conducting the offensive have been vetted by the C.I.A. and have received arms from the agency, including anti-tank missiles, said Charles Lister, a senior fellow and Syria specialist at the Middle East Institute in Washington.”

The article continues: “A spokesman for the C.I.A. declined to comment on any armed assistance to the rebels, which, although it has been well publicized, is also still technically a covert program” (emphasis added). … “Mr. Lister and other analysts said the vast majority of the American-vetted rebel factions in Aleppo were fighting inside the city itself and conducting significant bombardments against Syrian government troops in support of the Qaeda-affiliated fighters carrying out the brunt of front-line fighting.”

And further: “‘The unfortunate truth, however, is that these U.S.-backed groups remain somewhat dependent upon the Al Qaeda linked groups for organization and firepower in these operations,’ said Genevieve Casagrande, a Syria research analyst at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington. In addition to arms provided by the United States, much of the rebels’ weaponry comes from regional states, like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Mr. Lister said, including truck-borne multiple-rocket launcher systems and Czech-made Grad rockets with extended ranges.”
Need we say more? Few, if any, informed sources doubt that the U.S. government is central to the organization, arming, financing, directing, and perpetuating the war in Syria to remove the Syrian government. It has been so since early 2012—that is, shortly after the entirely justified mass demonstrations against the Assad dictatorship’s imposition of neo-liberal “reforms” that cut deep into the well-being of Syrian farmers and outraged democratically-minded forces.

**U.S. abetted “regime change” war**

Tragically, in short order, and especially with the Assad government’s firing on and arresting en masse peaceful demonstrators, the extremely limited and virtually leaderless mobilizations devolved into a U.S.-abetted “regime change” war, almost immediately involving massive ISIS and Al Qaida forces.

In a matter of a year, the latter well-armed and financed groups had literally occupied and conquered close to two-thirds of Syria while imposing reactionary jihadist-fundamentalist military rule virtually everywhere. Indeed, in October 2015, the Al-Qaida forces came close to conquering the entire Syrian nation—with militarized strongholds deeply established in the outskirts of the capital city, Damascus. It was only in recent months that in Daraya, for example, from which “rebels” daily launched artillery bombardments on downtown Damascus, negotiated agreements allowed for the “rebels” to evacuate unharmed. The same with another major Syrian city, Homs. Clearly, the Syrian government-requested Russian intervention had turned the tide.

But today, despite negotiated ceasefire agreements to similarly allow for the evacuation, through free passage corridors of Eastern Aleppo, of “rebels” and civilians alike, Al Qaida forces aimed at continuing the fighting and pressing for more U.S. weapons, have literally resorted to shooting residents who attempt to leave. During one of the several negotiated ceasefire periods, U.S. warplanes, “accidently,” so U.S. officials claim, bombed Syrian Army soldiers, killing civilians as well.
Syria’s right to self-determination

The intervention of Russia, as well as others invited by the Syrian government to intervene on its behalf (Iran and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah) have been central to the present and often heated polemics issuing from currents on the U.S. left who reject any characterization of the war as a U.S. imperialist onslaught. Instead, these currents stand firmly opposed to united front mass action mobilizations that demand “U.S. Out Now!” and “Self-determination for Syria!” What is transpiring in Syria, they insist, is a civil war between the Syrian dictatorship on the one hand, and a fully justified popular rebellion on the other.

Others in this camp often argue that Syria today is the scene of a “proxy war” between U.S. imperialism and “Russian imperialism.” In accord with this view, the U.S. antiwar movement must condemn “both sides” equally and demand that both leave Syria. Further, they insist that “Down with Assad” must be a central antiwar movement demand.

Revolutionary socialists, on the other hand, stand in unqualified opposition to these views. In accord with our unconditional support to the historic right of oppressed nations to self-determination, we demand “U.S. Out Now!” This unconditional right to self-determination, from the time of and in the revolutionary tradition of the Russian Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky to today, extends to all poor and oppressed nations, including those led by dictators, like Bashar Assad, or to Iraq when the U.S. invaded that nation, then under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. It applies to the U.S. and to all imperialist interventions in Africa and Latin America today, whether or not any of these poor and formerly colonized nations are led by “democrats” or “dictators.” The job of dealing with tyrants, in our view, resides only with the oppressed people of the world and never with imperialist oppressors and interveners.

Whatever “rebel” forces exist in Syria today, and shortly after the earliest stages of the mass anti-Assad protests that began in late 2011 are armed, financed, and organized by U.S. imperialism, NATO, Turkey, and their reactionary Gulf State surrogates, including ISIS and the Al Qaida-affiliated Nursa Front.
Following the “successful” U.S. slaughter and “regime change” in Libya, where the U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” destroyed the infrastructure of that country and killed thousands, U.S. imperialism set its sights on replacing the Assad government with one of its choosing. As with Libya, the U.S. proved to have no significant “democratically minded” allies in this venture. In addition to its own Special Operation killers, and covertly trained forces, in conjunction with its “coalition” allies (NATO, Turkey and the Gulf State monarchies), it provided massive aid to the “rebels” we have described in detail above. As a direct result, until the October 2015 Russian intervention, the above forces were on the verge of conquering all of Syria.

In our view, the right to self-determination necessarily includes the right of oppressed nations to request intervention from other nations—in the case of Syria, the intervention of Russia, Iran, and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah. This intervention, despite the intentions of capitalist Russia to use their new influence to seek a “negotiated” settlement, perhaps at the expense of Syria’s sovereignty, has had the effect of thwarting U.S. imperialism’s overt conquest of Syria. It has forced the retreat of ISIS, the Nusra Front, and the U.S.-backed “rebels,” all of which ceaselessly demand U.S. imperialist arms and intervention.

There is no doubt that Russian capitalism today has its own objectives in Syria, almost all of which center on a negotiated deal wherein the U.S. and the European Union will lessen the daily-increasing imperialist encirclement of Russia and ease up on the economic sanctions imposed on Russia following its opposition to the U.S.-backed fascist-led coup in Ukraine. While the Putin capitalist government is more than capable of negotiating away Syria’s right to self-determination, today its actions in Syria have had the effect of preventing a direct and immediate U.S. and allied conquest and occupation. This, in itself, however modest but important, is a gain for the Syrian people. It widens opportunities for future Syrian revolutionary socialist fighters to organize their own forces that stand opposed not only to all imperialist intervention but also against any capitalist government in Syria, including Assad’s.
Today, once again mired in a seemingly endless war in the Middle East, despised by all who have the vaguest memory of present and past imperialist wars of conquest and without any “reliable” allies on the ground, U.S. warmakers today seek a “negotiated” variant of their previous insistence on “regime change,” that is, President Assad’s removal.

I conclude this argument with reference to an important Sept. 30, 2016, New York Times article entitled, “Audio Reveals What John Kerry Told Syrians Behind Closed Doors.” Its author, Anne Barnard, The Times Middle East Bureau Chief, writes: “Secretary of State John Kerry was clearly exasperated, not least at his own government. Over and over again, he complained to a small group of [20] Syrian civilians [at the Dutch Mission to the United Nations on Sept. 22] that his diplomacy had not been backed by a serious threat of military force, according to an audio recording of the meeting obtained by The New York Times.

Barnard explains, “At the meeting last week, Mr. Kerry was trying to explain that the United States has no legal justification for attacking Mr. Assad’s government, whereas Russia was invited in by the government.” Kerry added another reason for his discouraging these Syrian civilians regarding their demands for more overt U.S. intervention. “A lot of Americans don’t believe that we should be fighting and sending young Americans over to die in another country,” he added.

Barnard reports that the secret recording included Kerry’s outlining U.S. plans to press for “free elections” to be supervised by “regional powers and the United Nations” that would include all Syrian refugees. In contrast to President Obama’s longstanding “Assad must go” policy, the “elections” Kerry outlined would allow for President Assad’s participation but, as with all imperialist supervised elections, his assured defeat.

After more than five-years of U.S.-orchestrated war in Syria, marked by an estimated 500,000 dead and nearly half the nation’s people displaced or in exile, the chief U.S. imperialist spokesman revealed today’s updated U.S. policy objectives, presumably to be achieved by further Special Forces operations, continued overt aid to all who seek Assad’s removal, and supplying just enough aid to the “rebels” to “keep the war going,” according
to The Times, in anticipation of an eventual negotiated settlement.

Needless to say, a principled U.S. antiwar movement must reject any and all “rights” of U.S. imperialism and its “coalition partners” to negotiate any aspect of Syria’s future. Central to the construction of a powerful and united antiwar today, fully capable of staying the hand of the U.S. warmakers and mobilizing tens and hundreds of thousands to do so, are two demands: U.S. Out Now! and Self-determination for Syria!
Socialist Action statement on the April 6, 2017 U.S. missile strike on Syria
April 10, 2017

Stop the U.S. Bombing of Syria! U.S. Out Now! Self-determination for Syria!

On April 6, the Trump administration launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria’s al-Shayrat military airfield. The U.S. strikes decimated a number of buildings and airplanes. At least nine civilians and six Syrian soldiers were killed.

Neither Trump nor any other U.S. government agency presented a shred of proof that the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used sarin nerve gas in its bombing of al-Qaida/Nusra Front or any other “rebel” held buildings in Idlib province.

History has repeatedly demonstrated the need to view with the greatest skepticism U.S. imperialism’s justifications for its endless wars and interventions.

Need we mention the 1964 U.S.-manufactured Tonkin Bay incident, wherein a virtually non-existent Vietnamese navy was accused of attacking a U.S. destroyer? That false flag pretext was employed to launch the Vietnam War, in which four million Vietnamese were slaughtered in a 10-year U.S. conflagration verging on genocide. Or the more recent Iraq “weapons of mass destruction” lie that resulted in the U.S. murder of 1.5 million Iraqis?

Even if the latest sarin gas accusations should prove to be true, we must vehemently reject the warmongers’ proposition that the U.S. military behemoth, with 1100 military bases around the world and currently conducting seven simultaneous wars of death and destruction, has any moral, legal, or other right to be the “cop of the world!”

Bomb first! Ask questions later!

Trump and his now bipartisan “Bomb first! Ask questions later” cohorts have ignited what could become a catastrophic escalation in the region, which could pose a serious threat of a nuclear confrontation.
Immediately before the U.S. missile attack, the Trump administration convened a bipartisan group of 25 Democrats and 25 Republicans for a congressional briefing session. While there was no indication of opposition to the Trump attack, a few, citing the U.S. Constitution, later expressed the need for congressional debate and approval before waging war.

Trump’s action came a day after Democrat Hillary Clinton had urged the U.S. bombing of Syria. Today, Trump has adopted a version of Clinton’s election-time “no fly zone” advocacy, suggesting that “safe zones” might be established in Syria—that is, land-based regions policed by U.S. imperialism and its allies.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson added a few days after the attack that missiles might again be launched against Syria should it use barrel bombs. He neglected to mention that the U.S. is the world’s largest manufacturer of weapons that kill civilians indiscriminately. Cluster bombs, banned in scores of countries, but not the U.S., are deployed by U.S.-allied Saudi Arabia in Yemen today. They rain down exploding spheres the size of baseballs. But the Saudis and U.S. imperialism are led by civilized people!

**Imperialism’s record in Syria**

Not one day of the years-long U.S. imperialist-abetted intervention has improved the humanitarian situation of the Syrian people. On the contrary, the U.S. government’s aim—as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—is to secure political hegemony in the region so as to better serve its profit-driven corporate clients. In order to accomplish its goals, as it demonstrated during the uprisings known as the Arab Spring, the U.S. must foreclose the possibility of self-determination for the peoples of the Middle East.

In reference to the Obama administration’s “red line” threat of war in 2012-13, Trump stated, “These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the past administration’s weakness and irresolution. President Obama said in 2012 that he would establish a ‘red line’ against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing.” No doubt Trump is fully aware that Obama’s “nothing” included five years of intervention that included CIA and Pentagon training and arming of “rebels” seeking Assad’s ouster,
a bombing campaign supposedly aimed at ISIS targets but deadly for civilians, and an increasing number of U.S. boots on the ground.

With Syria’s U.S.-backed “coalition” allies compelled to retreat from much of the Syrian territory that they previously occupied and terrorized, a bipartisan consensus has now emerged in Washington that Obama’s “regime change” orientation cannot be dismissed.

We are witness to a major shift in U.S. policy, in which Democrats and Republicans alike cannot brook a defeat in a war that they early on fueled and promoted. Today’s crisis-ridden world economy ruled by the wealthy one percent is compelled to pursue and intensify its wars against working people at home and abroad.

More military strikes threatened

White House representatives state that the administration has not ruled out taking further direct military action against the Assad government. President Trump’s national security advisor, H.R. McMaster, stated on April 9 that the U.S. goals of fighting ISIS and ousting Assad from power were “simultaneous.”

The Trump administration’s bipartisan-supported missile attack is aimed at advancing U.S. leverage at a future bargaining table in a contemplated reconstructed Syria. It is the first taste of the new administration’s promise to use the grotesque proposed $54 billion rise in the trillion-dollar war budget “more aggressively” in the interests of U.S. corporate capitalism.

The need for a united and massive U.S. antiwar movement in the streets of cities across the country has never been greater. Without equivocation, the central responsibility of all antiwar and social justice organizations is to mobilize against all U.S. and allied interventions in Syria and to fully support the right to self-determination of the Syrian people.

The defeat of imperialist intervention is the prerequisite for the Syrian masses to organize their own independent class-struggle forces aimed at fully meeting the needs and aspirations of Syria’s workers and farmers as they strive in the future to build a socialist society. Today’s U.S.-backed Syrian “rebels,” if they exist at all, are ever demanding that the U.S. bomb Syria to smithereens.
Indeed, these “rebels” are increasing integrated into and indistinguishable from the terrorist/jihadist al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front. They offer nothing in the way of liberating ideas and action for the Syrian people.

The days ahead will prove to be a critical measure of the antiwar movement’s capacity to unite and stay the hand of the world’s most dangerous superpower.
Trump’s ‘no fly zone’ escalates
U.S. war against Syria
July 3, 2017
By Jeff Mackler

The lie that the U.S. is fighting Islamic State (ISIS) terrorism in Syria was publicly exploded on June 18 when a U.S. F/A-18 “Super Hornet” fighter jet launched from the George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier shot down a Syrian government aircraft. Syria said its plane had carried out a mission against ISIS in the countryside near Raqqa—the capital of ISIS’s proclaimed caliphate.

State Department officials asserted that the downing of the Syrian jet was in accord with U.S. policy to operate under its unilaterally established “rules of engagement” that include the “collective self-defense” of its “Syrian partners.” Translated, the quoted phrases amount to a declaration that the U.S. and its imperial allies in Syria will attack any and all forces that seek to interfere with U.S. imperialist objectives.

In addition to its virtual “no fly zone” over the Raqqa region, U.S. generals have set up a similarly “protected” garrison at al-Tanf in southern Syria, on the key highway between Damascus and Baghdad, and where its “Syrian partners” and U.S., British, and Norwegian advisers are based. Here too, U.S. military tops have warned pro-Assad forces to stay out, having tagged this region with the newly coined euphemism, “zone of deconfliction.”

After the June 18 downing of the Syrian jet fighter, U.S. officials cynically asserted that “the coalition does not seek to fight the Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them … [but] will take appropriate measures to protect our forces.” Then, just two days after they shot down the Syrian aircraft, U.S. warplanes shot down an Iranian drone near the al-Tanf military base.

Establishing U.S. “No Fly Zones”

On several occasions, U.S. warplanes obliterated pro-Assad forces, including Iranian-backed militia, that had ventured inside its
“protected zone” near al-Tanf.

After a May 18 U.S. attack, Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis declared: “We should not take this U.S. strike as a sign that the U.S. is getting more involved in Syria,” an example of Orwellian doublespeak if ever there was one.

CBS News reported that on June 6 and again on June 8, when “27 [pro-Assad] regime vehicles drove within 18 miles of al-Tanf, which breached the [U.S.-declared] 34-mile radius of the army convoy’s operations, U.S. aircraft first attempted to buzz the regime, but when the convoy didn’t turn around, they [the U.S. forces] conducted a strike against some of the vehicles.”

“The rebels being trained at al-Tanf are from a number of Arab rebel groups, referred to by the U.S. as Vetted Syrian Opposition, or VSO, who oppose both the Assad regime and ISIS,” according to an article by Joshua Keating on the Slate website. Keating noted that “U.S. Special Forces have been increasingly fighting alongside these rebel groups in Southern Syria.”

The Wall Street Journal’s Yaroslav Trofimov reported: “The U.S. attack at al-Tanf is significant not because the U.S. has once again struck Assad’s forces, but because it did so in defense of Syrian rebels.” The same report observed, “Once skeptical about U.S.-backed anti-Assad ‘rebels,’ Trump stated in a 2015 election debate that ‘we have no idea who they are.’” Trump had suggested that they might be ISIS and added that “We can’t be fighting ISIS and fighting Assad.” Today, the U.S. is indeed fighting Assad, directly and indirectly, but its focus on ISIS is more complicated.

A June 10 New York Times article, for example, noted that U.S. forces in Raqqa were attacking ISIS from the North, East and West, but not the South. ISIS forces were allowed to evacuate Raqqa, weapons and military gear in tow, heading south along the Euphrates Valley toward Deir Al Zour, where obviously they might be useful in assisting the ISIS attempt to blockade Syrian forces in the city.

**U.S. contemplates “stabilization light”**

The public policy of the U.S. was presented in bold outline by several U.S. officials and top imperialist planners and reported in the June 23 New York Times under the headline, “U.S. Sends Civilians to
Stabilize Recaptured Syrian Areas.” The referenced “civilians” include representatives from the CIA-directed Agency for International Development and representatives from the array of countries that are supporting the U.S. war in Syria. Billions of dollars are to be expended in this effort, not to rebuild Syria, but to insure the stability of the occupying force in the regions the U.S. seeks to establish under its control.

A minimum of 1000 U.S. troops would remain in these “recaptured” regions, according to The Times report, and undoubtedly qualitatively more if the U.S. warmakers believe they can further leverage their intervention.

In the same article, Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, expressed a note of caution: “Syria is not a country that we control. This is stabilization light. We do not have, nor do we intend to get, control of the place, which would enable us to move and do these state-building activities.” (my emphasis).

She added, “What is also very important to understand is what is the tolerance of the Syrian government for the U.S. to go in and do these activities. There have been increasing tensions with the regime, with the Iranians and with the Russians and the possibility that we are backing into a war with the Assad government and its backers.” Needless to say, such a war has been underway for years despite the U.S lie that its illegal, uninvited presence in Syria is to fight ISIS.

The June 18 attack on the Syrian aircraft was not the first such overt assault since 2011, when the short-lived Syrian Arab Spring was quickly hijacked by covert U.S.–backed terrorist forces aimed at the same “regime change” operation in Syria that the U.S. had previously orchestrated in Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. Since the April 7, 2017 U.S. Tomahawk missile attack on the Syrian Shayrat air base—under the pretext of retaliation for the unproven claim that the Assad government used sarin gas—U.S. threats and overt attacks on Syrian government forces and its supporters have become routine.

(A June 25 detailed article refuting President Trump’s accusation that the Syrian government used sarin gas in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 has been published on the German on-line website Welt N24 Politik. Its author, Pulitzer Prize-winning
journalist Seymour Hersh, cites several top U.S. military advisers to President Trump as insisting that “this was not a chemical weapons strike.” But even after receiving reports that sarin gas was not used by the Assad government, or anyone else, the advisers note that Trump proceeded to bomb Syria anyway.)

The longstanding “covert” U.S./NATO/Gulf State monarchy regime-change war against Syria, wherein billions of dollars have been secretly extended to train and arm virtually all forces that aim to remove the Syrian government, has now become open. The notion that a civil war between competing Syrian factions prevails in Syria is a terrible fraud—one that is employed by both the U.S. government and its bipartisan propagandists, but also, tragically, by sections of the U.S. left. Syria, as with all poor and oppressed nations, is the undeniable victim of a U.S.-orchestrated imperialist attack, little different from the imperialist conflagrations that plague oppressed people and nations around the world—from the Middle East to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Hillary Clinton’s election-time advocacy of a “no fly zone” in Syria—aimed at preventing Syrian and allied forces, including Russia, Iran and the Lebanese-based Hezbollah, from ridding Syria of U.S.-backed forces—has now become President Donald Trump’s official policy.

“Deconfliction” is the new U.S.-invented term to designate the ever-expanding and always changing U.S. “no-fly zones,” that is, portions of Syria that the U.S. hopes to occupy now to maximize its leverage in a contemplated postwar Syrian negotiated settlement wherein Syria’s future is to be determined not by the Syria people or government but rather by the U.S.-established military relationship of forces on the ground.

As U.S. air war Middle East chief Lt. General Jeffrey Harrington stated, “Every war must come to an end, and when it does there will be a negotiated settlement.” In this context, Harrington bragged to the New York Times that his success in Syria resided in his efforts to increase the “space” controlled by U.S.-backed forces.
Syria’s Right to Self-Determination

With the Syrian government’s September 2015 request to the Russian and Iranian governments and Hezbollah forces in Lebanon to intervene on its behalf, Syria has retaken large parts of the country that were previously occupied by ISIS and other U.S.-backed forces. Some estimates put that previously occupied figure at two-thirds of the country. Syria, a sovereign nation, has every right to self-determination, that is, to defend itself from imperialist attack and to seek the support of allies to challenge U.S.-led war and regime change efforts.

Al Udeid is the U.S. Central Command headquarters in the Middle East—the nerve center of its air campaigns in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It is from Al Udeid that the U.S. conducts its now 16-year war in Afghanistan and its current wars in Iraq and Syria. Al Udeid supplied the air and ground forces in the U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” that destroyed Libya’s infrastructure. U.S.-backed mercenaries from Qatar then proceeded to “liberate” Libya’s capital of Tripoli using the now pretext that the Gadhafi government was about to exterminate 50,000 unarmed civilians in Benghazi. British government authorities now report that there was no such threat. Neither did the Saddam Hussein government have the “weapons of mass destruction” that the U.S. warmakers insisted were about to be unleashed on the world.

U.S. general espouses policy objectives

“If the Syrians were going to make a run at our guys, we were going to be in a position to defend them ourselves,” said Lt. General Harrington in a May 23 New York Times interview. “Our intent was to be in position to support our guys and get back into fighting ISIS.” The reference to “our guys,” of course, includes NATO and U.S.-financed and abetted terrorist forces aimed at Assad’s removal. There are no other forces in Syria today that operate independently of U.S. imperialism and its coalition partners.

and orchestrates the complex ballet of strike, surveillance and refueling aircraft that keeps the war going around the clock.”

This seemingly endless war has taken a terrible toll on the Syrian people. A respected polling organization—ORB International, which does polling for Western nations, including the U.S. government—nevertheless demonstrated that support for the Bashar Assad government and its Iranian allies far exceeds support for the U.S. and its “coalition partners,” including the Free Syrian Army, al-Qaeda and similar groups. Support for ISIS was miniscule.

Regardless, recognition and defense of Syria’s right to self-determination—an inalienable right of all poor and oppressed nations under imperialist attack or threatened by colonial occupation—is the critical dividing line in the U.S. antiwar movement today. While not taking any position on the Assad government itself, U.S. antiwar organizations like the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) are staunch defenders of Syria’s right to self-determination. UNAC unanimously re-affirmed this stance at its recent June 16-18, 2017 national conference in Richmond, Va., where over 300 activists from 31 states drew up plans for future coordinated, independent, mass mobilizations against U.S. imperialist wars. (See UNAC’s adopted Action Plan at unacpeace.org.)

The principle of the right of self-determination of oppressed nations has its origins in the worldwide struggles of oppressed people to win their freedom from the world’s chief colonizing and imperialist great powers that had previously divided and re-divided the world and subjected poor and conquered peoples to their rule. The history of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia is in great part a history of the just struggles of the conquered and occupied nations for freedom and self-determination.

Socialists and other democratically minded organizations have traditionally supported all such struggles against imperialist intervention, whether their leadership was socialist, bourgeois nationalist or even downright reactionary. This was the case, for example, when fascist Italy invaded feudal Ethiopia at the beginning of WWII, or more recently when the U.S. invaded Iraq and deposed the Saddam Hussein government. (Hussein had previously been a U.S. ally and surrogate when he invaded Iran in 1980 in a six-year war that took the lives of one million Iranians and 800,000 Iraqis.)
In all cases, the key criteria for opposition to imperialist war has been the understanding that, freed from direct colonial control, the working masses of these oppressed nations have the best opportunity to deal with their own indigenous oppressors. The resultant weakening and defeat of the imperialist occupier upon its forced withdrawal is an added bonus that factors into any world balance sheet measuring the relationship of forces between imperialist subjugators and their victims.

The right of self-determination includes Syria’s right to call for help from Russia, Iran, and others as they see fit. Such support—however equivocal and for whatever opportunist reasons it may be given—can have a significant impact on thwarting U.S. imperialist objectives. As compared to late 2015, much of Syria today is free from the direct control of the forces let loose by U.S. imperialism. It is these forces that are overwhelmingly responsible for the estimated 500,000 Syrians killed, including 100,000 Syrian Army soldiers as well as the 1.5 million Syrian refugees that are today scattered across the Middle East and elsewhere.

This is not to say that the Russia’s or Iran’s primary objective is the liberation of Syria from imperialist control, and certainly not the establishment of a socialist or even democratic Syria. Vladimir Putin’s objectives are simply to use Russian influence in Syria as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the U.S./NATO cabal and win some concessions with regard to NATO’s threatening encirclement of Russia and its imposition of stinging sanctions arising out of Russia’s opposition to the neo-fascist, US/EU-backed coup in Ukraine.

The recent widely televised two-part “Putin Interviews” with filmmaker Oliver Stone revealed Russian perspectives and politics in bold relief when Stone felt compelled to correct Putin’s repeated assertions of friendship with his “U.S. partners.” Stone asked, “How can you repeatedly call the U.S. your partner when it is ever surrounding you with NATO troops and imposing hurtful sanctions?” Putin could only smile and repeat his solidarity and claimed “partnership” with the U.S. while holding out his hopes that peaceful negotiated solutions of their differences would be forthcoming.

Putin, a spokesperson par excellence for a weak and isolated Russian capitalism, basked with Stone in the splendor of his ornate state-owned Russian dacha home, while praising the Russian
Orthodox Church, expressing his solidarity with U.S. imperialism’s “fight against terrorism,” and ridiculing the great 1917 Russian Revolution. Putin, who supported the U.S./NATO war that reduced Libya to rubble, lacked the good sense to hide his reactionary social views as he disparaged women and LGBTQI people. No liberating friend of the Syrian masses, Putin seeks a negotiated accommodation with U.S. imperialism. This is similar to other lesser capitalist nations that are increasingly compelled to bend to the dictates of the world’s sole superpower.

Yet Russia’s role in forcing the U.S.-backed armed forces in Syria to retreat cannot be dismissed, if for the sole reason that, absent an overt imperialist conquest, opportunities for future struggle of Syria’s working masses to advance their own interests will be that much greater. Tragically, history does not always offer a clear and straight path to liberation. Absent Russian and Iranian intervention in the Syrian conflict, the likelihood of US/NATO imperial victory would be virtually assured. The alternative to Russian and Iranian support for Syria can only be Syria’s return to imperialist-imposed great power domination or perhaps formal division or incorporation into neighboring states.

Today, Syria’s future rests less on the intentions of Russian or Iranian capitalists than it does on the future emergence of an independent anti-imperialist and socialist force inside Syria that champions the interests of the Syrian working masses and on capacity of antiwar forces in the U.S. and around the world to mobilize millions in the streets demanding “U.S. Out Now!” “Self-determination for Syria!” and “Money for Jobs, Not War!” These are the starting points for the mass antiwar movement that can best serve the interests of the Syrian people.

In addition to marches, rallies, and teach-ins, the economic might of the U.S. working class must be brought to bear. Indeed, the struggles against all U.S. wars abroad and the fight against the ever-intensifying wars against working people at home cannot be separated; in many ways it is the same fight. We must say no to the wars of the one percent both at home and abroad. Not one more dollar, not one more bullet for Washington’s wars!
Syria: Did Trump really end CIA’s secret war?

August 2017

By Jeff Mackler

“Trump Ends Covert Aid to Syrian Rebels Trying to Topple Assad,” read a July 19, 2017 New York Times headline. Citing The Washington Post as its source, the article noted that the official termination of the “secret” U.S. program “was never publicly announced, just as the beginnings of the program four years ago were officially a secret, authorized by President Barack Obama through a ‘finding’ that permitted the C.I.A. to conduct a deniable program.”

“Mr. Trump’s decisions,” said The Times, “amounted to an acknowledgment that no escalation of the program, which began in 2013 in concert with the C.I.A.’s counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan, was likely to yield a different result.”

The CIA and its “counterparts” were intervening in Syria even before 2013, if not congruent with the brief Arab Spring mobilizations of 2011, when poor peasants, democratically minded youth, and others protested against the Bashar Assad government’s neo-liberal and repressive policies. The New York Times revealed on June 21, 2012, that the CIA had been ferrying arms, recruiting, and training anti-Assad groups based in Turkey.

Simultaneously, the U.S. was the major power behind the Syrian National Council (SNC), which it established to be the new Syrian “government in waiting.” The SNC consisted of an exile-based 270-member leadership core that was overseen by the U.S. State Department and funded by most of the Gulf State monar- chies. Within a year the SNC exploded as it became clear that it was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, whose on-the-ground forces in Syria regularly collaborated with the al-Qaeda offshoot, the Nusra Front, and related jihadist groups.

This collaboration, together with the poor coordination and fighting ability of many tiny and localized “Free Syrian Army” units, led the CIA to seek out more “reliable” troops that would fight under its direct control. Over the past five-plus years the CIA and other U.S. government agencies have overseen various and re-named
reincarnations of the SNC and FSA, all aimed at publicly presenting these as secular and democratic forces as opposed to their jihadist and otherwise reactionary and pro-imperialist nature.


“Assad must go!”

With Libya’s pulverizing defeat under their belts, via the U.S. and NATO’s “humanitarian war” in that country, the original imperialist expectation was that Assad’s army would crumble and his government would fall in a matter of weeks or months. When this proved illusory, the now-admitted “covert” operations began in earnest, soon to include an estimated 50,000 jihadist fighters from 100 countries, but mostly from the Middle East, supported by untold billions of dollars in U.S., NATO, and other “coalition” nations’ arms, organized to accomplish in Syria what U.S. imperialism had facilitated, in one form or another, in Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq.

Assad’s repression of the protests in March 2011 provided the required U.S. pretext for his instant demonization and the subsequent demand of the Obama administration and its spokespersons, Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, that “Assad must go.”

General Tony Thomas, head of the military’s Special Operations Command, provided, according to the July 17, 2017 The New York Times, “the first public confirmation by an American official that the Trump administration had ended a secret C.I.A. program to arm Syrian rebels.” Although the program remains “classified,” when asked if it was aimed at currying favor with Russia, Thomas responded, “At least from what I know about that program and the decision to end it, it was absolutely not a sop to the Russians … it was a “tough, tough decision.” The CIA, upstaged by Trump, said The Times, “declined to comment.”

In point of fact, yesterday’s “covert” operations in Syria have at least in part been replaced by the Trump administration’s overt “no fly zone” war over Syria today. Utilizing their massive air-power superiority in the region, U.S. fighter jets now routinely attack Syrian
government troops and those of its allies from Iran and Hezbollah from Lebanon whenever they move to challenge U.S.-backed and still existing “rebel” positions in areas where the U.S. contemplates a long-term, if not permanent, presence.

(See “President Trump’s ‘no fly zone’ escalates U.S. war on Syria” by this writer in the July 2017 issue of Socialist Action.)

Having lost most of the territory that ISIS and the reactionary U.S.-allied forces had previously occupied, today’s bipartisan imperialist war strategy revolves around establishing control over key border areas in the north as well as in southern Syria for future use, the latter likely as a contemplated pipeline route across the Middle East to the Mediterranean Sea. U.S. wars in the region, including in Iraq, buttressed U.S. corporate control of vast oil and natural gas resources that in time will require more competitive or advantageous routes than those planned by Russia. “To the victor, go the spoils of war!” as President Trump is fond of proclaiming.

Revelations in The New York Times

That the U.S. was conducting a covert war against Syria was no secret. Its basic outlines were frequently reported by The New York Times, with its Middle East Bureau Chief Anne Barnard periodically citing the details, albeit usually buried deep in her articles that aped the imperialist line justifying every U.S. war in the region.

Largely based on Barnard’s revelations, the bulleted selections below, taken from my Jan. 18, 2016, article entitled “U.S. imperialism’s Syria strategy,” provided an accurate summary of at least some of the key U.S. “covert” war efforts.

• “U.S. Major General Michael Nagata was unceremoniously removed some two months ago after his $500 million Syrian assignment to train by the end of the year a projected 5400 Syrian infantrymen to supposedly fight ISIS (Islamic State of Syria and Iraq) ‘languished in complications,’ according to U.S. News and World Report. This project ‘ultimately yielded a force of fewer than 60, most of whom were immediately captured or voluntarily surrendered their U.S.-provided military equipment to extremist groups. Nagata’s program, aimed at training 15,000 such fighters over the next three years, was similarly abandoned.’”
“The Oct. 9, 2015, New York Times article entitled, ‘Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,’ states, ‘Obama’s reversal of policy underscored a harsh reality: tens of billions of dollars spent in recent years to train security forces across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia have rarely succeeded in transforming local fighters into effective, long-term armies.’

“Today, after four and a half years of U.S. ‘training of security forces,’ supposedly to defeat ISIS, some two-thirds of Syria, mostly thinly-populated areas, is under the control of one or another jihadist group—either the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front, the Islamic State (ISIS) itself, or other Islamist groups. Virtually all are directly, indirectly, or covertly armed and financed by U.S. imperialism, its NATO allies, the Saudi government (and ‘private’ Saudi billionaires), Qatar, the United Arab Emirates or other Gulf State monarchies.

“In place of this failed program the Obama administration recently announced a ‘new program’ where, ‘for the first time the Pentagon is providing lethal aid directly to Syrian rebels, though the C.I.A. has for some time been covertly training and arming groups fighting Mr. Assad’ (emphasis added). (The New York Times, Oct. 9, 2015).”

In the same article, I wrote, “The U.S.-allied Saudis and the Turks today account for the lion’s share of ISIS’s finances and weapons—undoubtedly with the full knowledge of the U.S. government. The reactionary Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a U.S. NATO ally, still controls important portions of its southern border with Syria and utilizes these as central corridors for the entrance of thousands of international ISIS fighters to Syria to depose the Assad government.

“In the same manner over 1000 trucks from ISIS-controlled oil fields in northern Syria serve as the main conduit for ISIS-smuggled oil into Turkey.”

Today, with the “covert” cat out of the bag, The Times asserts that this allegedly now defunct CIA program “joins similar failed efforts to deliver arms and money to groups seeking to overthrow governments that Washington found noxious, most famously the Kennedy administration’s disastrous effort to do away with the government of Fidel Castro in Cuba.”
Russia’s “targeting and badly weakening the C.I.A.-backed rebels, who were the most capable of the opposition fighters [against Assad]” was seen by The Times as decisive to the Assad government’s winning back Syrian territory. In this regard the Syrian government’s request for Russian assistance was wholly within its right to self-determination, that is, to defend itself against U.S. imperialist intervention, war, and the organization of a “rebel” army aimed at the removal of the Syrian government itself.

As it turned out, U.S. aid to these same “rebels” was not enough to allow them to achieve key U.S. objectives. That is, according to The Times of July 19, it was “not sufficient to clear the way for their takeover of major cities or [to] approach the capital, Damascus.” These issues, along with the now undisputed fact that the vast array of U.S. arms supplied to these same rebels ended up in the hands of forces that the U.S. deemed terrorist, essentially convinced Trump, if not his generals, that a total U.S. victory in Syria was not possible—unless the U.S. was prepared to engage in yet another land war akin to the present imperialist catastrophes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

After six years of U.S.-orchestrated war in Syria, at a cost of 500,000 dead and nearly half the population displaced or in exile, U.S. imperialism continues its effort to dominate a poor nation in order to advance the corporate interests of the one percent, with Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, former chief executive officer of one of the world’s leading fossil fuel multi-national corporations, Exxon-Mobile, perhaps being the visible symbol of all that is rotten and corrupt in the imperialist U.S. body politic.

The demand for the immediate and total withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Syria and the Middle East must stand at the center of the U.S. antiwar movement’s efforts today. Self-determination for Syria! U.S. Out Now!
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