Khiyana
Daesh, the Left and the Unmaking of the Syrian Revolution
Jules Alford and Andy Wilson (eds)

Essays by
Muhhamad Idrees Ahmad, Javaad Alipoor, Leila Al-Shami, Mark Boothroyd, Joseph Daher and Shiar Neyo,
Sam Charles Hamad, Bodour Hassan, Michael Karadjis,
Louis Proyect, Eyal Zisser

Unkant Publishers
London
2016
Contents

Assad an-Nar: Socialism and the Democratic Wager 1
Mark Boothroyd: Who are the Syrian Rebels? The Genesis of the Armed Struggle in Syria 41
Sam Charles Hamad: Anti-anti-Imperialism—The Syrian Revolutionary War and the anti-Imperialist Left 67
Mark Boothroyd: The Syrian Revolution and the Crisis of the Anti-War Movement 91
Louis Proyect: The Betrayal of the Intellectuals on Syria 111
Muhammad Idrees Ahmad: The anti-Imperialist’s Guide to Inaction in Syria 131
Sam Charles Hamad: The Rise of Daesh in Syria—Some Inconvenient Truths 145
Leila Al-Shami: The Struggle for Kobane—An Example of Selective Solidarity 197
Javaad Alipoor: Quwwah al Ghadhabiyya—Iran, Syria and the Limits of Khomeinism 205
Joseph Daher: Interview With Shiar Neyo 235
Budour Hassan: Nasrallah’s Blood Soaked Road to Jerusalem 245
Mark Boothroyd: Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up? 251
Michael Karadjis: The Class Against Class Basis of the Syrian Uprising 265
Eyal Zisser: Can Assad’s Syria Survive Revolution? 269
Contributors

Muhammad Idrees Ahmad is Lecturer in Digital Journalism at the University of Stirling and the author of The Road to Iraq: The Making of a Neoconservative War (Edinburgh University Press 2014). He co-edits pulsemedia.org. Javaad Alipoor is a mixed race artist, writer and socialist based in northern England. He blogs at attheinlandsea.wordpress.com. Mark Boothroyd is an NHS staff nurse, a socialist activist, and a founder of Syria Solidarity UK. Jospeh Daher is a Doctor in Development at SOAS (London), assistant teacher at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland), founder of the Syria Freedom Forever blog and a member of the Revolutionary Left Movement (Syria) and Solidarities (Switzerland). Sam Charles Hamad is a Scottish Egyptian writer and commentator on the Arab Spring and the Syrian Revolution. Shiar Neyo is a Syrian journalist and activist of Kurdish descent who has lived in exile for around a decade. Louis Proyect is a life-long socialist activist, writer and commentator. He is the moderator of the Marxism mailing list and a member of New York Film Critics Online. Eyal Zisser is dean of the faculty of humanities and the Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair of Contemporary Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University.
The narcissism of the left is so thoroughgoing that it now conceives revolution and counterrevolution in terms of its own worn obsessions rather than proceeding from events. Thus the left has become largely irrelevant to the calculations of those actually engaged in revolution. But we proceed differently. Contemporary revolution calls for a reassessment of everything the left has come to believe because the raison d’etre of the left is to serve the social revolution, and this now positively demands such a rethink. Therefore this essay is unashamedly about the contemporary left and its impasse.

Left wing anti-imperialism today exists as an immense accumulation of platitudes and stupidities—in terms of the bare facts, in terms of social reality, and in terms of the objectives lying beyond the theory.

The problem goes all the way down, so that older travesties of the left’s platforms are happily being travestied all over again. Consider the emergence of ‘Stalinism without Stalinism’. None of its positions are associated with genuine beliefs. Then there is the corresponding danger that the critique of ‘Stalinism without Stalinism’ overshoots and becomes itself a travesty of earlier anarchist, Trotskyist or liberal critiques by failing to register the changes that have allowed the old language, the old certainties, to float free.

We need to be clear when considering the Stalinist, totalitarian legacy and ideology. More often than not, these adaptable ideas sprang from a species of reformism. What could be more natural
in a world dominated by a competing hierarchy of nation-states
than to reframe politics as being essentially concerned with
such competition. Stalinism can be considered as an historic
adjustment to the 'Game of States.' It is not by coincidence that
Stalinism has emerged as the dominant form of reformist leftism
in both the global North and the global South of late capitalism.
The puzzle is how this tradition—a disaster in the historical
calculus—has emerged dominant, given the many challenges it
has faced.

Two historical moments are pivotal today. First there is the
crisis of the post-68 left. Second there is the crisis of anti-im-
perialism in an age of revolution. These are tied together by the
changing nature of revolution and anti-imperialism in an age of
neoliberalism and the difficulties of the post-colonial moment.
The main problem is in relating the large scale changes to the
details of the situation: the crisis of Social Democratic moder-
nity in the global North and the post-colonial states in the global
South and the radical movements which have fought against these
tendencies. In this context the anti-war movement that sprang up
in the North in the early part of the twenty first century must be
understood, at least in part, as a false dawn marked by a deter-
mined clinging to illusions.

That section of the left that fought against this historical
riptide has itself in turn descended into the worst of these trav-
esties; either sectarian denial of the new revolutions or active
counterrevolutionary propaganda on behalf of those who pay the
wages of yesterday's full time activists with no other career pros-
pects in view.

The idea of history as scientifically underwritten, the idea
that the working class was swimming with the current, must be
given up. The principles of self-emancipation, of collective and
democratic struggle are now ideas in search of a subject. The
identity of theory and practice was loudly proclaimed just as
the unity of theory and practice was evaporating into myth. The
coming unity of theory and practice can only be achieved
through the struggles now taking place. The contradiction that
democratic revolutions can have undemocratic consequences
in the age of neoliberalism and globalisation is a post-colonial
challenge that older, authoritarian versions of leftism cannot
address. Parochially these large issues raise the question of how
to be a minority for revolutionaries committed to ‘socialism from below’, and what the latter means today.

The Era of Arab Revolution

The era of Arab revolution was foreshadowed by the Green revolution in Iran and culminated in the overthrow of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Theocracy was rocked in Bahrain but the rebellion was then crushed by theocratic intervention. The revolution swept through Syria in March 2011 and hatched into a brutal war whose course has disorientated a left that previously had confronted imperialism. In the C20th, ideas about democracy, socialism and the struggle against imperialism were at least conceived as running in the same direction; today they are frequently counterposed to each other. This is true not just of the slogans but of actual movements that may each be taken as a moment of freedom but negate that moment when they engage in military clashes with each other; for example, between those fighting for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey and revolutionary forces in Syria; or the deep divisions within the Palestinian movement and its supporters internationally; or, finally, the bitter divide on the global left between those seen as supporting counterrevolution and those seen as being in league with imperialism. The picture is one of profound disorientation and a growing incoherence of the most basic concepts of socialism—revolution, democracy and imperialism—as they apply today.

It all seemed so different in the period after 2001, when the left cohered around opposition to Bush’s ‘war on terror’ and a generation was radicalised around the issues of war and imperialism in the Middle East. The Bush administration’s martial, neo-conservative rhetoric appeared out of kilter with the post-colonial world, and the response was the convergence of older and newer radicalisms. Following considerable debate and argument large sections of the global justice movement adopted slogans denouncing imperialism, and what had begun as a movement uniting radical and moderate NGOs focussing mainly on economic issues appeared to undergo a further political radicalisation. The cycle of huge anti-war demonstrations which followed appeared to take all this in a yet more radical direction, while bridges were built connecting previously divided sections of the global left. Controversy was not absent—some of those controversies have
Syria

returned to haunt us—but the sense of momentum was real despite the movement’s failure to halt the Bush administration.

The anti-war movement was a panacea for the ills of the left in Britain and internationally. Tendencies, traditions, currents and parties that had for years experienced decline and stagnation were suddenly at the centre of a mass movement, while their previously anonymous leaders were transformed into figures of some prominence in the ruling media spectacle and mainstream politics. Threadbare hacks suited up for their interviews on Russia Today.

There was still a yawning gulf between the fierce global reaction to Bush’s ‘war on terror’—a reaction that signalled not just the rebirth of radicalism but also restiveness among rising and established powers to the US over reaching itself—and the continued weakness of the left in the global North and elsewhere. It was this imbalance that has led to crisis on the left, as social rather than geopolitical issues moved to the foreground—a subject to which we will return below.

We witnessed an apparent revival of older politics that was one of the less fruitful features of the wave of opposition to imperialism and war in 2003. But instead of utilising the opportunity to rethink left politics in the face of such far reaching popular radicalism there was a tendency to treat events simply as a vindication of the existing perspectives of a decrepit Western Trotskyism or other traditions, ranging from left nationalist to the orthodox Communist Parties. Swept along by unaccustomed prominence in public debate, many attributed this to the acuity of their venerable perspectives rather than those unexpected events themselves. This was also a characteristic feature of responses to the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries (consider how early books on the motive forces of events in the MENA dated badly and have become unreadable). Such reflections have descended into grim parody (think of Tariq Ali cheering on Russian bombers as if this was a rerun of the Battle of Kursk and Russia was striking a blow against imperialism). Perhaps the dissonance lodged in such a stance was not so apparent in the early days, but the siege and destruction of Aleppo underlines the absurdities of a position whose harvest is much wider disorientation. After the pantomime of attempting to understand the revolution and counterrevolution across the MENA countries we can see the left
failed to grasp the implications of globalisation, clinging instead to their premature *a priori* analyses of global politics.

The attempt to reestablish a more directly colonial relationship with the most contested geopolitical region in the world, and the Bush administration’s vocal unilateralism, summoned forth a powerful ideological reaction across the political spectrum. As Idrees Ahmed notes in his satirical article in this volume, liberal internationalists and realists alike found themselves opposed to Bush’s ‘war on Terror’, with this reflecting a real division and ideological crisis within the political establishment. Some of those figures even appeared on platforms associated with the anti-war movement, including the late Charles Kennedy, leader of the Liberal Democrats. Similarly who could forget George Galloway leading chants of ‘Don’t attack, Chirac’ before almost a million people in London who were protesting the planned invasion of Iraq? Both were symbols of the odd ideological alignments of the period.

In 2003 it was possible, as you sat in a London pub after an anti-war demonstration, to find yourself discussing with disillusioned senior civil servants of one stripe or another. You might witness the odd Lord sat on a platform organised by Trotskyists, before spending the evening demonstrating outside the Egyptian Embassy because Mubarek had gaoled Egyptian anti-war protesters. One forum ended up as a debate between a representative of the US and Iranian embassies—not the sort of meeting that those on the traditionally marginal British left were accustomed to hosting, but a striking index as any of the turmoil inside the establishment.

At a more global level there were similar ideological complexities that also fed into the disorientation of the left. As in the global North, older and newer traditions collided. In the face of the rising rhetoric around the ‘war on terror’, previously small forces active around both human rights and neoliberalism suddenly found new opportunities to connect to wider debates in society as older modes of anti-colonial discourse enjoyed a revival in the face of US unilateralism. This created difficulties for established political organisations who often now had to pay lip service to these older discourses, in order to maintain a relationship with their younger members in what was an early indicator of the future salience of generational questions on the left.
Hence the spectacle of anti-war demonstrations in the MENA region (which often faced severe repression by the state) made up of radical NGO activists on the one hand, and members of constitutional and social-movement Islamist factions on the other, plus various revived fragments of the old Stalinist and Arab nationalist left. One important distinction between events here and in the West was that if it were true that social elites shared some of the ideological turmoil, in most places it was much more rare amongst political elites given the shape of these authoritarian dictatorships ensured the relative cohesion of the state even in the face of crisis at the level of society. So almost all of these states backed Bush’s ‘war on terror’ despite considerable social discontent.

There was then a strong sense in which social discontent and geopolitics were yoked not only at the level of ideas but also concrete experience in the minds of many left activists. This reached its apogee in 2006 when Israel invaded southern Lebanon and the explosive issues of US unilateralism and Israel’s occupation detonated, revealing a wider social crisis throughout the region and piling up political difficulties for those colluding with Bush’s policies. It seemed the heady atmosphere of 2003 was repeating itself: this was after all the period of notorious slogans—‘We are all Hezbollah now!’—which both stoked controversy while faithfully reflecting a mood in which many saw Hezbollah as combining the burning geopolitical questions of the day—at the cutting edge in terms of the political crisis of US backed Israeli aggression—while at the same time developing an ecumenical appeal which repudiated the sectarianism that at the time was hampering ‘the resistance’ inside Iraq and marked a developing reactionary response to the social dimensions of the political turmoil.

At this point in the narrative we should note a little discussed difficulty with viewing Hezbollah in this way (though of course there are many others). It was certainly true that Hezbollah had an important social as well as political dimension aside from its ideology. Hezbollah’s ability to garner support beyond its social base in the Shiite population was not simply connected to being seen as the ‘national resistance’ by many Lebanese but also had much to do with the frustration of other minorities in the face of the continued national dominance of an older oligarchy in Lebanon.
What in the Middle East appeared as a phenomenon specific to the Shia universe, namely a moment when a religious-ethnic identity could become the vehicle for a struggle to democratise the region, is shown in its proper context when we zoom out and, for instance, point to the manner in which the struggle around caste in India has arisen again. This radical moment—combining the discontent of an emerging section of the ruling class with those lower class minorities, often oppressed on religious or ethnic grounds—exemplifies radicalism in the global South in the post-war years. As we shall see, the vacillations of the global left—by turns refusing to support these movements on grounds that they were not socialist, or claiming their fulfilment would only be realised in a socialist revolution—saw its blood drenched and complete climax in Syria.

However, despite the hopes of the left the kinds of social resentments that allowed for this expansion of their social base had little to do with any overt opposition to neoliberalism. Rather it involved the aspirations of many excluded from the old oligarchy who wished to enjoy some of its fruits. A French documentary maker tells the story of making a film about Hezbollah and being taken on the usual tour of the slums of the oppressed Shiite population in the traditional poor parts of Beirut and the south. However the French documentary makers’ Hezbollah minders were not fully on board with this official programme, and indicated their frustration with foreigners who only wanted to film poverty and dilapidation. Instead these Hezbollah minders wanted to show film crews and journalists the prosperous Shiite areas and the new upwardly mobile populations that lived in them, which they saw as an important symbol of the success of their movement. Similarly many of the of the children who provided the cadre of the Islamic Republican Party in Iran criticise the internationally lionised Iranian art films, not on grounds of their explicitly political dissent but because they dwelled on the lives of the village and urban poor instead of the ‘successes’ of the malls in the North.

There exist a larger set of family resemblances with other social and political movements in the global South where neoliberalism has had similarly contradictory effects on both radical and reactionary movements, with new kinds of populism of the left and right variety emerging while older political formations sought to adapt to these new constituencies. The failure to exam-
ine the social dimension of these issues more closely foreshadows many of the confusions of the left today faced with very different kinds of democratic revolution than those that were debated in the early part of the C20\textsuperscript{th}. Instead the left has fallen into the trap of either totally dismissing the actually existing revolutions—conceived simply as part of some neoliberal, geopolitical plot—or on the other hand, explaining the setbacks and contradictions in terms of older scripts and theoretical schema which can be seriously misleading about the character of the social and political forces involved.

While students of the contradictory social impact of neoliberalism in other parts of the developing and post-colonial world would be familiar with sentiments of this kind they would be much less familiar with their expression in this sort of ‘radical’ context. In fact in this context, the formally anti-imperialist and democratic elements of Hezbollah’s politics, is now doubly occluded by the transformation of Hezbollah into a symbol of the status quo as its members depart Lebanon to help strangle the Syrian revolution. These actions of Hezbollah are an example, albeit atypical, of the way these sorts of political formation—standing at the intersection of identity, a movement for democratisation and the aspirations of a section of the lower middle class intelligentsia who for reasons of sect or ethnicity or some other factor, are shut out of the summit of the neoliberal middle class—can swing between revolution and counterrevolution and back again, without ever moving in a socialist direction. This reality is contrary to the analyses of almost all sections of the international left, whose strategic outlook is based on the assumption that at some stage a necessarily socialist or working class element has to either supersede or break from such movements dominated as they are by ‘alien’ class forces and interests. In fact, it is exactly the atypical nature of a group like Hezbollah that illustrates the prevalence of this kind of social dynamic even in the most unexpected cases in the global South, not to mention how, as Hezbollah’s trajectory illustrates, movements in the grip of such dynamics can move in either a revolutionary or counter-revolutionary direction.

The major theme of this preface is that socialists must make the ‘democratic wager’; though, being a ‘wager’, its outcome is inevitably uncertain and cannot be guaranteed. Socialists should remember that they are a minority within much wider movements
for objective reasons. Therefore the left must learn not to counterpose itself to the kinds of revolution taking place, and grasp that between democracy and dictatorship it *always sides with democracy*. This also means understanding that such transitions are real social and political processes and not doomed to irrelevance. Such a starting point is necessary if socialists are to develop a distinctive non-authoritarian voice amid wider movements and social forces in which it is otherwise marginal. And we should understand that while the situation is in many ways different to that of the global North, the lessons and political conclusions are relevant to the predicament of socialists in this part of the world. Few individuals are regional ‘experts’ or specialists of this or that local part of global late capitalism, but it is our firm conviction that part of the job of the left is to offer a coherent picture of events which have a wider or global significance and to address our failure to do so. In other words, this cannot be an orientalist discussion. The coming ‘international’ demands that this is part of a global and not a local discussion, and all socialists should take part. The time is past when it is in any way appropriate or meaningful to talk of the ‘margins’ of global or late capitalism. This is not to deny that ‘margins’ exist, or that you can no longer point to actual zones of underdevelopment within the global economy. It is simply to say that the old, simple binaries such iterations imply, are false to the core. The capitalist economy is a world economy characterised by the dispersal of ‘independent centres of capital accumulation’ distributed across the globe, in competing, cooperating and hierarchical nodes, blocs and states.

One difficulty with developing and presenting this argument is a tendency on sections of the left to address the revolutions in the MENA countries as if they were simply extensions of the struggles against neoliberalism witnessed in Southern Europe since 2008. Crucially the question of democracy and dictatorship is left in abeyance, a knotty couplet that is absolutely central to any understanding of these recent upheavals. These are questions whose social content has, we would argue, been transformed in the last twenty years, and is central to grasping why these social upheavals took place when they did and why we see a similar ‘social churning’ (albeit with very different results) in other parts of the global South. Our argument will revolve around the distinction between the political and ideological crisis of social democracy/welfarism in the global ‘North’ and how that
Syria

The Arab Spring began with the Green movement in Iran. This is so in two senses. First, similar social forces were at the forefront with the mobilisation of significant sections of a university educated lower middle class that was unable to find a role in the state system that educated them. Both movements also involved substantial sections of skilled workers, the young unemployed and members of ethnic and religious groups that was excluded from power in the post-colonial state. In the case of each group there was a complex relationship with the emerging neoliberal status quo with, on the one hand, an awareness of the of the new wealth the neoliberal dispensation made possible, accumulating in certain social strata and locations, combined with a growing ressentiment that ethnicity and generation, barred them from enjoying the new wealth. Secondly, like its successor, the demands of the Green movement were national and democratic demands. Equally, like the ‘Arab Spring’ these demands were ignored or glossed by the wider international left still hope-fully clinging to the vanishing ‘unity’ of a rapidly declining anti-war movement. The demonstrations in Tehran of early 2010, when official Quds Day parades were hijacked by demonstrators answering ‘death to the dictator’ and ‘death to Russia’ to the official chants of ‘death to Israel’ and ‘death to America’ may clearly be seen as a modest precursor to the wider regional storm soon to come.

As the ‘Arab Spring’ unfolded the focus on demands for democratic and national renewal persisted. Beyond the region the left responded either with varieties of Stalinist defence of the existing dictatorships, or more ‘progressively’ with reheats of the theory of Permanent Revolution and its concomitant insistence that these revolutions must either end in socialism or defeat. Those readers who are familiar with IS/SWP traditions debates on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, will perhaps recognise the theoretical bind—a bind all the more ironic given the analysis sprang from the State Capitalist tradition. Today Permanent Revolution is a recipe for despair or ultimatism—unwittingly supplying alibis for despair or even counterrevolution. The left are then the classic sectarians who imagine they occupy Olympus when they are in reality marching in the rear explaining the ‘inevitability’ of defeat to the
people. Today we are compelled to ask: is the democratic revolution possible? Certainly yes. Does that mean socialists should tail end the democrats? Absolutely not. We must put behind us the ultimatism resting on an schematism masquerading as theory. Such a position makes the left irrelevant at best, or even worse—as we saw with the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists—the reactionary cat’s-paw of an alien ideology.

It is necessary to accept that real revolutions have taken place, they were smashed and they were not socialist revolutions. To rework the old joke about the Iranian revolution, the fact that we don’t really understand the contradictions of the C21st is our problem not the problem of the C21st.

**Permanent Revolution**

The dualisms of theory have generally been based on some return to Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. As we know, Trotsky’s theory was based on analysis of the twilight of the Tsarist state but was later given a more general significance. Permanent Revolution suggested there were either two alternatives: socialist revolution led by the working class or Tsarist counterrevolution. Whatever tasks of the bourgeois revolution were outstanding would have to be carried out by the working class. Trotsky’s theory was premised on the idea of uneven but combined development: despite Tsarist Russia’s backwardness, the working class, though a tiny minority, was very advanced as it was concentrated in some of the most modern factories of the world economy, while a revolutionary conflagration could spread internationally, sparking socialist revolution in the more advanced zones of capitalism in Western, Central and Southern Europe, thus rescuing Russia from its backwardness (or rather returning it to its ‘backwardness’ but at a ‘higher’ level within the framework of a pan European or international socialist commonwealth). Trotsky later generalised the theory to the colonial countries after the failure of the October revolution to spread led to the rise of Stalinism. One crucial difficulty was that the colonial state did not hothouse capitalist development after the fashion of the Tsarist state. Instead the colonial state typically played a far more contradictory role: a certain level of economic development was required in an increasingly international system, to ‘balance the books’, but becoming an ‘independent centre
of capital accumulation’ was not necessarily the goal. Naturally, debates on the precise balance of development or backwardness bequeathed by colonialism continue, but it is our view that these questions are a part of the far larger problem that uneven but combined development by definition will produce different outcomes in different circumstances.

After Trotsky’s death Permanent Revolution was falsified by reality. Colonialism was overthrown or shrugged off more often than not without the intervention of the working class, while ‘independent centres of capital accumulation’ sprang up across the world economy. As a coherent current Trotskyism disintegrated, since clinging to Permanent Revolution in defiance of the real world led either to a denial of the reality of the anti-colonial revolution or the ascription of socialist properties to many unlikely candidate social formations (often authoritarian). As the theorists of state capitalism argued: sticking to the letter of Trotsky’s formulations neglected their spirit and led to the opposite form of politics.

Even in the 1920s and 1930s capitalist development was apparent in ‘backward’ countries that were clearly able to act independently of imperialism (i.e., Mexico and Turkey). Trotsky recognised these cases but considered them exceptions. Subsequent history showed this nascent development to be the rule rather than the exception, while the real ‘deflection’ proved to be the 1917 October revolution. So, in the emphatically post-October world after 1945, Permanent Revolution as a theory was as comprehensively refuted as any theory possibly can be. Was anything left of Trotsky’s understanding of the nature of global capitalism? Yes—the theory of uneven but combined development which had allowed Trotsky to accurately forecast the social forces that made the October revolution.

As decolonisation proceeded, different patterns of uneven and combined development produced different patterns of social relations and politics which deserve proper consideration in their own right. Instead Trotsky’s theory became a fetish—a ready-made alternative to trying to understand that world. Naturally Permanent Revolution was preferable to the ‘stages theory’ of the Stalinists who were equally marooned in the 1920s-30s with their anti-Trotskyist polemics, but in any case the universe of the October revolution had long since vanished. Yet in the 1970s in countries as diverse as Poland, Iran, South Africa and Brazil,
capitalist development began to produce sizeable working classes and the theory of Permanent Revolution was disinterred. In that great wave of industrialisation it was anticipated that these countries of the global South and Second World would recapitulate the experience of Russia in 1917 but it was not to be. In the post-war period new ideologies flourished like nationalism and populism and proved enormously influential, whether it was Peronism in Argentina, national liberation in South Africa or the Catholic Church in Poland, or more generally democratic ideologies of various stripes. The working class was divided politically but in this period nonetheless played a major strategic role and was more central to the struggle than the organised working class has been in the current wave of struggles in the Arab world. Also the process of the ‘deflection’ of the revolution grew more complex. Classically in the immediate post-war years of decolonisation, ‘deflection’ was conceived in terms of a specific social strata—petit bourgeois intellectuals or army officers, for instance—getting their hands on the levers of state power. But in the 1970s-80s new emerging bourgeoisies proved quite capable of acting on behalf of their own interests and performed neither like the cowardly bourgeoisie of Tsarist Russia or the bureaucratic statist social strata of the 1950s-60s. Since the ‘neoliberal’ turn in the 1970s, accounts of ‘deflection’ have grown increasingly strained compared to the earlier mild ad hoc-ery of the Tony Cliff and Nigel Harris variety.

The conditions of global capitalist production everywhere today are entirely different to those of 1917. This may account for the relative marginality of the organised working class in contemporary struggles compared to the 1970s-80s. The specific nature of globalisation and neoliberalism also drives a massive social churning in developing countries, involving social classes some of who have risen as older established elites declined. The various political reactions to the unravelling of a post-colonial order that the Trotskyists could not even admit existed requires more than a simple restatement of a century old social theory. It demands a new analysis of neoliberalism in an uneven but combined late capitalist global system. Analyses of the impact of these forms on actually existing social classes and their actual politics as opposed to appeals to a theory of revolution merely to exorcise those contradictions, is what is really required today. So analyses of living social forces are necessary, and it is not enough
merely to repeat the truism that there is a working class in Egypt or China or India: this is now no more newsworthy than the existence of a working class in Britain or France or Spain. This fact alone tells us nothing while any social theory that functions as a subtle veil filtering social reality or a form of compensation preventing a proper confrontation with actual social and political relations in the real world, is a useless dogma.

Neil Davidson has argued that globally we no longer live in the era of bourgeois revolutions, so the theory of Permanent Revolution no longer makes sense (in the same way as it would make no sense in Britain). Putting the argument baldly, many of the countries concerned are now more or less independent centres of capital accumulation, and there are no substantive bourgeois ‘tasks’ to be fulfilled thereabouts. We believe that this ‘useless dogma’ has become a substitute for analysis and leads to catastrophism: the erroneous view that there are only two courses in any historical situation—either proletarian revolution or counterrevolution. Evidently this is not the case for most history since 1917. On the other hand, it may lead to the false conclusion that there is an automatic pattern of radicalisation and that history is necessarily on our side. It leads most obviously to repeated efforts to make reality fit our theory instead of using theory to explain reality. In fact, working class movements across the global system have often been polarised between different kinds of middle class politics. What is crucial therefore for the international left is that it not abrogate its responsibility to support these democratic movements. Only by doing so can it create a space to criticise existing leaderships and push for socialist, left democratic movement.

It is false to continue to treat entirely new developments as incomplete versions of events that took place almost a hundred years ago in different circumstances. Such a view is at bottom simply untenable. For example the events of Egypt, the leftist misreading of the army coup as the ‘next wave’ of the revolution and the subsequent bloodbath is such an appalling error that it should provide food for thought for the whole international revolutionary left.
Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood

Sam Charles Hamad argues elsewhere:

*In Egypt, democracy heralded the conditions for the emergence of a new bourgeoisie, one that was inherently antagonistic to the current bourgeoisie and the anti-democratic regime of authoritarianism and patronage which it engendered. The revolution of January 25 did not constitute the vanquishing of the current bourgeoisie and the victory of the emergent bourgeoisie, but rather the creation of a model through which the emergent bourgeoisie could wield and compete for power with the traditional established ruling classes.*

Hamad notes the interplay between the two classes, but also the friction that shaped relations between 2011 and 2013. The vanguard of this emergent bourgeoisie proved to be the most developed political and social oppositional force in the country with a broad activist base: the Muslim Brotherhood.

In a social process that began with Sadat’s ‘Intifah’, the Egyptian ruling class increasingly opened up society and economy to liberalisation and the world economy as the welfare state and social services constructed during the years of Nasserism, entered their terminal decline. As a counterweight to this atomising process Mubarek’s neoliberal kleptocracy allowed the Muslim Brotherhood space to provide a thousand different social and welfare programmes stretching from schools and hospitals to social services and utility provisions. An unofficial state within the state, the apparatus constructed by the Muslim Brotherhood absorbed the inevitable rising tensions engendered by the impact of neoliberalism on Egyptian society. The pacific, moderate Islamism of the Brotherhood was far preferable to the ultra-conservative radical Islam of most of Egypt’s Salafist movements. The economic and political influence enjoyed by the Muslim Brotherhood and its patrons allowed the organisation’s leaders to operate as an ‘outer’ bourgeoisie with a degree of symbolic political representation.

Yet there were severe limits to the freedom and influence enjoyed by the Brotherhood under Mubarek’s system of economic patronage. For example, while Khairat el-Shater, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood member, was allowed to build his businesses, his enterprises were restricted and subject to draconian moni-
toring by the regime. In 1992 while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was aiding the Mubarek regime in restructuring the economy, el-Shater’s lucrative business ‘Salsabeel’ was raided on the dubious pretext that it was a front company being used by the Muslim Brotherhood planning to overthrow the Mubarek regime. The enterprise was shut down and el-Shater was imprisoned. In 2005 el-Shater suffered the same fate and was imprisoned again. El-Shater, like Mohammed Morsi and other leading Brotherhood figures, was in prison as a political prisoner when the revolution broke on January 25th.

The relationship between the Mubarek regime and the Muslim Brotherhood was contradictory. On the one hand the Brotherhood was subject to a certain level of repression, yet on the other hand is the fact the Muslim Brotherhood provided a social safety net that saw it develop beyond any other political force in the country. It was a beneficiary but also victim of the regime’s authoritarian regulation of society. This stance had a contradictory impact within the Muslim Brotherhood and especially its ruling ‘bourgeois’ circles; embrace of neoliberalism, but also repudiation of authoritarian patronage, a mixture that in terms of the social constitution of the leadership was the mainspring of its ‘reformism’ and embrace of ‘democracy’.

Of course the Muslim Brotherhood was far more than its leading tier, and while critics might point to the dangers of complicity arising from its interaction with the regime and the incorporation of certain behaviours and practices (an inherent danger any reformist entity runs in such circumstances), the social base of the Brotherhood set in motion a different incremental dynamic that underlined the organisation’s potential to be a mass movement while simultaneously drawing attention to an ideological Achilles Heel—it’s historic commitment to theocratic rule. Yet the masses drawn to the Muslim Brotherhood were drawn by the practical welfare safety net it built and by the presentiment of an alternative to repressive rule it offered, not because they secretly desired to live in a theocracy.

The Brotherhood realised it had no future representing the disenfranchised if it disregarded what the disenfranchised wanted, and so that mutation ‘Islamic democracy’ was hatched. The twin pillars of ‘Islamic democracy’ were democratic rule and social conservatism and these provided the foundation of the ‘Freedom and Justice Party’. Those observers who were blinded
The Democratic Wager

by the real counterrevolutionary import of the July 3rd coup, were also blind to the composition of the Muslim Brotherhood’s mass, largely disenfranchised social base that had delivered the January 25th revolution two years before. Even today with al-Sisi’s military dictatorship in the ascendancy, legions of youth, many of them ‘Ultras’ (urban football fans), react to the brutality of the hated Central Security Forces and the Baltagiya with their slogan: ‘ACAB!’ (All Cops are Bastards). Muslim feminists hold defiant women-only marches, campus sit-ins and protests continue alongside the protests of nonviolent ‘revolutionary’ Salafis who want democracy in order to institute theocracy. All these forces coalesced around the movement to oppose the military overthrow of Morsi, and they represent a refutation to the reactionary view of the main opposition to the Egyptian ruling class and military.

These fragmented, repressed oppositional currents at present do not pose a serious threat to the al-Sisi regime but they are the seeds of a future revolt and a new society. This basic analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood and its disenfranchised mass social base illustrates an alternative space the revolutionary left could have occupied: supporting the actually existing movement for democracy while retaining its organisational and critical independence and making links with leftist elements in the movement, and can be sharply contrasted with the sort of irrelevant counter factual debate that leftists like Gilbert Achcar indulged after the coup. Notwithstanding the confusion of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and the International Socialists Tendency (IST) internationally on this question, Anne Alexander made the point in a review of Achcar and Hanieh’s book on Egypt that:

The Brotherhood, it is critically important to emphasise, was by far the largest political organisation in Egypt outside the old ruling party and in 2011 had never been tested in power, not even in local government. It had only once, in the 2005 elections, won more than a handful of parliamentary seats, and this brief period of respite from repression had ended with the 2010 parliamentary elections where the ruling party had reasserted complete control of the electoral arena. The fact that it took a revolution to force open a space in which the Brotherhood could even begin to play a meaningful reformist role (in the sense of advocating reforms which the organisation might be
in a position to test in practice) underscores this point. Even though the Brotherhood’s programme of reforms was weak and hesitant, a reputation untarnished by the dirty business of actual government was an invaluable asset in mobilising the hopes of millions of Egyptian who believed the political system could be changed within.

How did the Brotherhood’s mass social base develop between 2011 and 2013? While in power it is clear the Brotherhood alienated sections of the working class by pursuing the neoliberal policies described by Achcar and Hanieh. The Muslim Brotherhood government became increasingly willing to repress strikes and social protests during its year in power. Tareq el-Beheiry, a Salafist activist and one the key leaders of the Cairo bus workers, provides a salutary example of the Muslim Brotherhood’s trajectory in power. In June 2012 el-Beheiry mobilised thousands of votes for Morsi during the Presidential campaign with Mubarak’s last Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq. Months later he was arrested for leading a strike and denounced by the same people he had helped bring to power. Yet there were layers of the Brotherhood who remained loyal—during the battles over constitutional amendments in 2012-13, lower middle class cadres defended the Presidential palace.

As Chris Harman argued in an influential 1994 essay written in the wake of the bloody repression of the Algerian Islamist movement\(^1\), such contradictory elements are a defining feature of Islamist movements. We need to reject any perspective that views Islamist movements as ultimately an homogenous, reactionary bloc. Analysis should instead assess the context in which such movements arise and the specific social makeup of the forces they mobilise. Moreover, as Sameh Naguib has argued in a powerful critique of the Egyptian left’s attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood that was written before the revolution\(^2\), failure to make such scrupulous assessments has led to tacit or active support for the state’s attempt to crush Islamist movements, an error that echoes the stance of the Stalinist left since July 2013.

Millions invested their hopes in the Muslim Brotherhood in the absence of any political alternative. The organisation’s electoral success in 2011 not only reflected the Brotherhood’s long history of opposition to the regime but also the advantages conferred by access to organisational resources and funding that its rivals lacked. Secular reformists like Ayman Nour and Mohamed El-Baradei had also been persecuted and marginalised by the Mubarak regime but had no organisation to compete with the Brotherhood on a national level. Hamdeen Sabahi, the Nasserite figure boasting the biggest national profile, began the revolutionary period in a similar position. Sabahi rejected the option of building an independent organisation, focusing on a relatively loose coalition of supporters known as the Popular Current. Yet the Popular Current was rapidly infiltrated by elements of the old ruling party. The revolutionary youth groups and the tiny forces of the revolutionary left likewise lacked the organisation and numerical muscle to compete with the Brotherhood electorally.

Neither were the Brotherhood’s reformist and revolutionary rivals able to use the influence they wielded beyond the electoral sphere to maintain the momentum of the revolution. The secular reformists, principally the liberals and Nasserites formed an alliance with figures from the old ruling party like Amr Moussa (Moussa had fallen out of favour with the ruling party before the revolution). The National Salvation Front (NSF), lent political direction to the massive waves of street protests that engulfed Morsi in Nov-Dec 2012 and in Jun 2013. The politics of the National Salvation Front’s leadership prevailed for a brief moment—and included an even more insipid version of the Brotherhood’s milk and water socialism. Fatefully, instead of promoting a political programme for expanded social and democratic rights to mobilise their supporters and widen their base, the liberals and Nasserites opened the door to the political rehabilitation of the military and judiciary under the cloak of defending the ‘independence’ of the judiciary. The final catastrophic consequence of this approach was played out in the crisis of 30 Jun 2013 and its aftermath when the military intervened against the Brotherhood to turn the wave of protests against Morsi in a counter-revolutionary direction and deposed Egypt’s first democratically elected President.
In the post-mortem debates that followed, both Sam Charles Hamad and Anne Alexander alluded in different ways to a central dilemma: namely how the liberals were unable to compete with the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Some on the left even demanded the democratic elections be delayed to allow the liberals more time to organise. This reflected anxiety at the paradox of how a real democratic revolution in a society such as Egypt would involve the kinds of political forces that those on the left-liberal spectrum would usually recoil from.

The revolution aroused a society that had long been repressed. Yet it would also mean the election of more socially conservative forces than the young revolutionaries occupying Tahrir Square. But this represented a deepening of the revolution, as millions were being drawn into political life for the first time. Not to understand this ambiguity and develop an understanding about how to position oneself in relation to this development led many liberals and leftists to join the growing backlash against the Morsi government that, while it obviously reflected genuine social discontent and frustration with the slow pace or absence of reforms, also the drew the old compromising feloul and other elements who eyed democracy and the entrance of the masses into political life with hatred and suspicion.

Clearly this was a major error in a country shaped by repression but also long-standing traditions of authoritarian radicalism, to be pushed to a point where one allied with groups holding up the democratic process as an object of criticism because they could not be elected. There are principled reasons why this should be obvious but there are also tactical considerations. For example, those critics of the democratic process often lacked a social base but could end up allying with forces hostile to democracy, like those elements of the old order which did have a social base. So the former could become an ideological outrider for the latter. In Egypt like Syria the complexity of the revolutionary process demanded understanding events on their own terms. An analogical Marxism that believes we are simply reliving the past is worse than useless in such fast changing circumstances.

Of course that did not mean that agitation against Morsi’s government was wrong per se, but clarity was required about the stakes involved in any confusion of democratic and anti-democratic complaints. The same applies to any confusing of the Marxist analysis of the limitations of reformism with airy
dismissals of important reforms—including the unprecedented introduction of representative democracy. One of the difficulties was that a section of the left argued Morsi was colluding with the military while others, including many liberals, held that Morsi was planning to set up a theocracy. Often these distinct arguments were run together. We will leave aside further discussion of what the left in Egypt could and should have done, but regarding Syria we should be concerned about those who minimise the opposition to Assad’s regime and the need for solidarity with Assad’s victims and the revolution.

Hezbollah

Considering the anti-war movement at the beginning of the century, it is interesting to recall how Hezbollah and the regimes supporting it found themselves for a while in the same current as the international left. The instability of the politics of the left is exposed by its attitude to the group, Hezbollah, that once seemed to represent the opposition to the post-war imperialist order in the Middle East, but which now lends active support to counterrevolution in the region.

One of the ironies of Hezbollah’s trajectory is that part of their social base lay beyond sectarian identities, being rooted among those disenfranchised by the dominant Lebanese powers. This has been a more general pattern of the democratic revolution in the age of neoliberalism; disenfranchised populations demanding their place in the sun under authoritarian dictatorships where the benefits of economic development accrue to favoured social groups due to the nature of the regime. Thus social churning on one side is accompanied by the authoritarian repression on the other, and thus often throws up issues of identity. Socialists make a mistake if they imagine these issues, connected as they are to social suffering, are marginal. Demands for social justice have been closely connected to demands for dignity. Equally it would also be a mistake to neglect the reality that this oppression and marginalisation can be articulated in a ‘democratic’, rather than a social form.

Those leftists who sided with Hezbollah for geopolitical reasons often underestimated the complexity of this disenfranchisement and its relation to neoliberalism. So those who expressed surprise or regret with Hezbollah’s refusal to
offer a critique of neoliberalism misunderstood the social logic of the latter, which was seen by many of forces inside Hezbollah as facilitating social mobility in rigid and stultifying societies. A fundamental point follows for understanding the era that democratic revolutions against oligarchies can bring together the beneficiaries and victims of neoliberalism. Of course questions of social justice still arise in the ensuing social turbulence but they are often raised in relation to the dominant discourse of democratic revolution in the era of neoliberalism.

The social contradictions of neoliberalism and authoritarianism are further complicated for those on the left by the fact that in comparison with the 1970s left wing ideas and the social forces associated with them are far weaker as collective subjects within the general democratic upsurge. The irony of Hezbollah’s trajectory is that it once expressed a rather similar logic in Lebanon but is now a weapon of counterrevolution in the region, monstrous and reactionary. Socialists must side with the democratic revolution against authoritarianism. We must make the democratic wager while understanding we are a minority within a much broader social turbulence. Our job is to fight for our right to exist within the movement, taking great care never to counterpose ourselves to this turbulence.

It is not only about numbers or the lack of them, as Marxists should be the first to understand. The working class itself is not disconnected from the democratic revolution. It is generally one social actor participating, to a greater or lesser degree, in the general democratic upsurge, sharing its possibilities and contradictions instead of being a social force setting its face against the ferment. This is not to disparage the possibilities of the global working class, although one thing we can expect if the history of the ‘classical’ workers movement in Europe is any guide, is that history will neither be straightforward nor a repeat of the past. A minimum of clarity and sobriety about the nature of the revolutions in the current era is required. In relation to Egypt some on the left have argued the problem was the left was not strong enough to pose an alternative to the FJP. Had it been so this would have been a profoundly significant development, but surely the real problem was the left was not strong enough to pose an alternative to an Egyptian state that was committed to undermining the democratic reforms only recently won, and
ended up siding with the opponents rather than the supporters of those reforms.

Even so neoliberalism does contain contradictions, generating major social conflict meaning there is a vacancy for global capitalism’s grave digger. Many of those social contradictions are obscured on the left by geopolitics. They exist in a wide spectrum across sectarian barriers and regions of the system. As we noted this relates to the peculiar contradictions of capitalism in most of the world and the problem of revolution and counterrevolution. The ‘peculiarities’ mean that those in the vanguard of democracy in one moment, can find themselves driving counterrevolution in the next moment, like Hezbollah. Perhaps a more pertinent example of this logic, of the shift from ‘progressive’ to ‘reactionary’, would be Erdogan in Turkey.

Only recently Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, courageously supported a No Fly Zone (NFZ) in Libya, tipping the balance towards the rebels and revolutionaries against Gaddafi’s regime. The main effect of this intervention has clearly been to greatly reduce the casualties in the Libyan Civil War with estimates varying between 2,000 to 10,000, a loss of life that should not be minimised, but far below the shocking death toll estimated for Syria (and despite Libya’s current instability the Libyan people did at least rid themselves of their dictator). Yet the shift of Nasrallah and Hezbollah from destabilising existing oligarchic, authoritarian hierarchies across the region and sectarian barriers, to becoming a force for sectarianism, reaction and stability was almost inevitable in the era of democratic revolution and neoliberalism, and incidentally marked a shift that wrong footed the left too.

Eventually ‘geopolitics’ would have its revenge on the force that had succoured resistance across the region. In crucial respects such developments reflected a wider problem thrown up by the unravelling of the older ideologies of resistance and the decomposition of the postwar post-colonial states that briefly seemed to take a pause or even flare up in one last glorious revival before the run-in to Bush’s war on terror. But Hezbollah were always unlikely candidates for the role of a C21st Nasserism. In 1979 the Iranian Revolution signalled the dissolution of the old ideological era. The period that followed pushed new social forces to the fore, resulting in some strange ideological mixtures.
Syria

The pause was temporary however, and the revolutions and upsurges that followed did not give substance to this strange Indian summer but finally killed it off. Today any remodelled contemporary left or progressive politics must look the real world in the face. Far from facing the changing realities of the C21st revolution, the collapse of that brief moment early in the new century when the left could act the role as ‘players’ in the game of ‘geo-strategic resistance’ has led to the renaissance of a certain kind of reformism that has come to dominate the left, namely ‘campism’ or ‘neo-campism’. The origins of campism lie in the revolutionary socialist critique of Stalinism, where a particular state or bloc of states substituted for the working class in the struggle for socialism. Naturally the assumption was that this state or bloc of states had already embarked on the construction of socialism and this construction coincided with, and was shaped by inter-state competition, conceived ideologically as a global struggle with imperialism and international capitalism. Peculiarly since the collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’ in Eastern Europe (or State Capitalism as the libertarian revolutionary currents maintained), some of the terminology of that earlier period survives, recycled to understand quite different modalities of struggle, different kinds of revolution, and new social forces.

Perhaps the most relevant key to understanding our present moment is that present day campism is an inversion of the conventional meaning of internationalism. For a campist, the 1956 Hungarian Uprising prompted solidarity with the Russian tanks crushing the Hungarian workers councils. What was at stake was the abandonment of the primacy of the social struggle and a elevation of the geopolitical struggle in its place.

Today campism is closely attached to a politics that eschews the radical overturn of existing social conditions. In the past generations of leftists and progressives made the Soviet Union a placeholder for the idea of international struggle of the working class (as that class had gone down everywhere to defeat in the inter-war period). The Soviet Union came to constitute the countervailing power the international working class failed to constitute, especially in Western, Central and Southern Europe. ‘Neo-campism’ is dominant when those who oppose the global order in some way cannot imagine an alternative to that global order. In the global South the belief that restructuring the
fundamental social and power relations obtaining between the North and South would greatly improve the wretched existence of the vast majority of humanity, is pervasive and fuels the eternal search for a countervailing power or camp to neoliberal global capitalism. The sigh of the oppressed may take many distinct or complementary forms, and ‘neo-campism’ is one of those forms. If you cannot fight for yourself because you are too weak or marginal then the temptation is to look to other social forces who can do it for you. This response can range from the shoddily opportunistic to the desperately heroic but it never comes from a position of strength.

Today the phenomenon of ‘zombie Stalinism’ or ‘Stalinism without Stalinism’ paradoxically flourishes in a world where only the terminally confused or outright mercenaries actually believe or pretend to believe that Putin represents some sort of alternative to capitalism. Watered down versions of old fixations substitute for any engagement with the social forces of the revolutions and struggles for social justice. Seemingly more sophisticated exponents of campism, like Vijay Prashad, argue that the BRICs\(^3\) represent a new camp against the ‘West’, and in doing so succeed in reheating the old ideology of the non-aligned countries while ducking the question of these countries’ internal social relations. Reflecting on the appearance of this degenerate version developmental reformism of the global South, the inescapable question that arises is how the international revolutionary left ever got itself entangled in such a banal ideological discourse.

Left Social Democracy has drawn on both Second and Third World variants of campism ever since the Fabians before the Second World War began dreaming of a statist order modelled on the Soviet Union. Thus campism is a tradition that has deep roots—roots that have sprung from working class defeat on the one hand, and the dominant reformist tradition in the workers movement on the other.

Of course we are in another universe today, where the illusions of campism are hard to sustain against a refractory reality that so readily lays them bare. We all know stories about Putin’s ‘anti-fascist’ youth movements being largely full of people who only yesterday were fascists. The world is gradually turning upside down.

\(^3\) BRIC—a grouping acronym referring to the countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China.
down while the visible signs that a morbid politics is in decay, are also more apparent. Yet the grip of such a phantom discourse on the left should not be underestimated, based as it is in the left’s own weaknesses both on the campist and non-campist left. Appreciating this reality can help the non-campist left combat those ideas whose pernicious logic is likely to be deeply destructive.

The anti-Stalinist left should be used to the fact that large sections of the left are susceptible to Stalinist illusions A crucial issue is how a lack of confidence among people in their own ability to unite in struggle has intersected with Stalinism’s alarming ability to reinvent itself since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Though the Soviet Union disappeared, the ideological illusions it created have clung on. Marx long ago observed that if you wished to abolish religion you would also have to abolish the material conditions that gave rise to religious illusions. The material conditions that generate the need for people to look for substitutes for their agency—distress and oppression on the one hand, married to feeling relatively powerless, on the other—all of that continues to exist in late capitalism both because of, and despite the miscarriage of concrete utopia.

In India there are many on the left, intelligent people, who despise the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Navindar Modi but who have illusions in Putin as an alternative to US hegemony because the dominant forms of reformism in the postwar period in the South were premised on the idea that weakening Western imperialism allowed the advance of the anti-colonial struggle. Some of this was reflected in the once immensely influential ideas of the nonaligned movement though—in a delicious dialectical inversion—some of those who were once the most hard bitten critics of the non-aligned movement on the basis that it was ideologically incoherent or illusory now champion the ideas of the movement. But then internationally the left is fragmented and incoherent, whilst any accompanying conceptualisation of the world by the left falls behind the world, a reality painfully evident in the lack of a real movement of solidarity for actually existing revolutionary movements we have seen in the last decade (a lack matched by the abuse and slander aimed at the few who have raised the issue of the left’s fundamental duty of solidarity and internationalism).
Instead of genuine internationalism we have the dominance of a perverse ersatz internationalism, where swathes of the left dream of a new edition of the Congress of Vienna, but with Vladimir Putin leading proceedings along with who else one may ask? Perhaps Marie Le Pen? General Sisi? Those who rule in Tehran and currently lock up and kill trade unionists? Or someone who knows how to deal with troublesome Muslims as Putin did in the second Chechen war, over a decade before lending Assad his aid and experience in laying waste to whole towns and cities? To pose the question is to reveal how reactionary the answer is.

The dangers of campism are ever-present, and so the temptations or dangers of reverse-campism, can unwittingly lead sections of the left into their own specific campist positions. This problem reflects the complexity of contemporary late capitalism. There is no immunity to a dilemma arising from real contradictions, and which demands of the left respect for the complexity of the world as the prerequisite of analysis. For example it is understandable that supporters of the Syrian revolution will support any robber or bandit who is willing to help protect them from genocide. We understand that the interests of the robber or the bandit do not coincide with the revolution. If they did there would be absolutely no risk or price to be paid for accepting their aid. As the situation is, the problems of the revolution dictate that you would probably be a fool not to accept the aid offered despite the risks: we are discussing a real revolution no matter what the charlatans on the left say. Nevertheless we also see supporters of the Kurds appeal to the same logic—a logic that has partly led to, and reinforced the fragmentation of the left today. It is a difficulty that admits of no easy answers but again suggests scrupulous analysis of the geopolitical situation without succumbing to the merely geopolitical is a bare minimum for left politics. For example the support of any news source that challenges Russia or Iran but may perhaps be inflected by seemingly modest anti-Shia sectarianism can affect those who lose their critical faculties and hatch into something darker, say, uncritical support for Saudi foreign policy in the region.

In the case of the Syrian revolution, campism’s logical development is the complete denial of the agency of the revolutionary sections of Syrian society. The dominance of the ‘proxy war’ narrative and the idea that ‘the Saudis’ (or ‘Qataris’ or whoever) are behind everything, has flourished on the left like a stubborn
prejudice. But leftists and socialists should be very careful using the term ‘proxy war’. To begin with it is a term used by those who favour stability over revolution. It is the ‘view from the top’, originating in policy circles, right wing or liberal think tanks, elite universities and so on before migrating to the pages of the ‘serious’ bourgeois broadsheets and employed to obscure the domestic social and political struggles of the region and opponents of the revolution outside the region. It is associated with the reduction of revolutions across the MENA to the interests of lesser and greater powers, the competing hierarchy of nation states, as well as bolstering the conspiracy theories of existing states like; for example, the absurd charge that Morsi’s ascendancy was part of a Qatari plot against the Egyptian nation. Have various powers tried to intervene in the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary war in Syria? Yes. Does this mean the struggle in Syria can be reduced to a ‘proxy war’? Emphatically not. Very simply, to believe the struggle in Syria is reducible to a ‘proxy war’ is to view the events of the last five years upside down. The wider jostling of states like Iran and Saudi Arabia is real enough but the Syrian struggle cannot be reduced to this deadly sub-imperialist conflict.

The idea that revolutions in this situation cease to exist and become instead ‘proxy wars’ reflects the same ‘view from the top’ that regards the masses as more or less useful pawns mobilised in the cause of someone else’s struggle. As a fundamentally elitist idea it obscures analysis in an expedient, conservative fashion and turns aside from the real complexity and tragedy embodied by real struggles. Geopolitics should be understood in terms of revolutions and social conflict, not the other way around. The fact that Marxists have largely not had a coherent analysis of these vast and tragic social upheavals does not justify turning away from these events in the hope that something better than reality will turn up to vindicate our theories. Such a ‘guide’ to life, such theory deserves to die horribly. Revolutions do not cease to be social upheavals simply because they do not subscribe to theoretical schemes concocted a century ago. Theory that does not illuminate beyond the bewitched circle is not worth a candle. The absorption of the language of Realism and the view from Mount Olympus is not a sign of the sophistication of today’s socialists but a symptom of their decrepitude.
In the current context of the Syrian revolution and conflict across the MENA there is a predisposition to viewing the Saudi’s as the evil genius of regional geopolitics, a view that long ago achieved the heights of satire (how to appear clever: “the Saudi’s are behind everything”). In reality the ‘counter-intuitive’ idea that the House of Saud and the Saudi state have been playing catch up and are still behind the geopolitical curve, might be far more fruitful for understanding what is happening across the region. Consider a comparison: it is remarkable how little commentary there is on the left about the tacit US-Iran pact of stability that now exists, utilising Shia sectarianism and terror to shore up Iraq (a tactic extended by Iran to Syria on behalf of Assad). To highlight this disparity does not imply support for the reactionary Saudi monarchy, but there has long been a tendency to subscribe to fictional narratives among a section of the left that treats the Saudi’s (and Qatari’s) as the reactionary nemesis of police state’s like Assad’s, as if good enough reasons for a people’s revolt against the Baathist state did not exist. Political understanding and theory as a censor filtering the world and deciding questions on the basis of ideological convenience reigns supreme. What is missing is any kind of analysis that attempts to grapple with the actual, often contradictory, positions of sub-imperialist states like Saudi Arabia.

A casualty of the revolution and counterrevolution in the MENA in the last five years has been the leftist public intellectual. Those who possessed the intimate knowledge of the region that would have allowed them to navigate the region’s complex conflicts on behalf of a wider movement have simply failed to do so. The absurd, opportunist rubbish that was churned out instead is very possibly something we will live with for generations.

Today we find ourselves in the extraordinary situation in which most of the global media, Stop the War Coalition (StWC) and, sadly, the bulk of the left are united in effectively blocking news of the horrors presently taking place to restore ‘stability’. There is nothing courageous or principled about such conduct, as if echoing Tory leader writers who cheer lead Assad is the same as Zimmerwald. A real incoherence has been exposed at the heart of left politics in the ‘West’—an inability to include ordinary people outside of the Western context in a clear principled political position. When ‘these’ people can only be considered if they fit preexisting agendas, approved national liberation move-
ments or favoured nation-states—in other words, anything that involves any form of solidarity (always a two-way process)—then there is a profound problem. It indicates an even greater problem; the degeneration of the basic idea of ‘socialism from below’ almost everywhere in the world. This is emphatically not a period where the only forms of activism are anti-colonial in the East and proletarian in the West; it was not really true in the 1920s either. Maintenance of such anachronistic views constitutes a modern form of orientalism.

Oddly the alleged status of a section of StWC’s leadership as hailing from the State Capitalist IS tradition, is beyond the point. It is certainly true that at the high point of the anti-war movement in 2003 all sorts of people united from different traditions to oppose imperialism. The significant point is that today we see the decline of the StWC as movement reflected in the fact that it has increasingly undermined its raison d’etre as an anti-war and an anti-imperialist movement by reproducing the arguments of counterrevolutionary regimes in the region that claimed as a matter of official state ideology to be anti-imperialist. The credulity of much of the left on this score then poses the left a real analytical conundrum: how can we have a sensible discussion of the contemporary nature of imperialism as a consequence? Increasingly this problem means that whilst many continue to support the activity of the StWC because of its support for the cause of anti-imperialism understood in the broadest context, it risks turning the legacy of what was once a broad movement into an outpost for cranks, conspiracy theorists and counterrevolutionaries, thus seriously discrediting the wider left. Shrill defences from within StWC of a series of invitations of odious figures on to its platforms are an index of how far this process of degeneration has already run.

Clearly there is a link between the lack of social weight, moralism and pretenderism on the one hand, and the attraction to conspiracy theories, on the other. Certainly conspiracy theories have received a great deal of oxygen in recent years. It is remarkable that many of the same narratives for ‘understanding’ the Syrian revolution are shared by those descended from the IS tradition or the Stalinists in the StWC leadership but also right wing conspiracy types like Alex Jones or David Icke. We maintain that opportunism and what we characterise as the ‘NGOisation of the left’ are part of the explanation for the adoption of
conspiracy theories by parts of the left. It is a symptom of the times and the left’s weakness that people will often say in effect: what we say and argue is primarily determined by how it carries politically, as opposed to what is true. But the decision to tell lies is always itself political and provides another of example of the existence of ‘Stalinism without Stalinism.’

Neither will these ‘mistakes’ be forgotten or overlooked. As Ella Wind argued:

Something else will inevitably become clear as more and more Syrian refugees arrive in Europe and elsewhere and these pro-Assad ‘anti-war’ activists run the risk of having to talk to real, breathing, talking and thinking Syrians face-to-face. These refugees consider themselves in large part to be running from the terror of their own government, and I promise you they will insist on saying this. They will insist because it is their own distant relatives, childhood friends, lovers and children who have been ‘disappeared’, tortured, shot at by the regime for posting Facebook statuses, for talking politics within a group of friends they thought were trustworthy, for going to the streets and singing ‘get out Bashar.’ They will insist on saying this and there will be increasing numbers of them and the contradictions will become painfully clear between the pro-Assad ‘anti-war’ narratives of abstract dead Syrians or refugees fleeing on boats on a television screen, killed and terrorized by the ‘American conspiracy’, and the narratives of the Syrians in person who have lived flesh and blood experience of the Great Syrian Exodus of the last four years.

All of which is to say that every time a leftist in Britain or the US (or some other relatively charmed zone of the world), shares the latest useless missive by Noam Chomsky or Tariq Ali on social media, they are stirring a great lake of sectarian blood.

**Post-Colonial Struggles**

There are some subtle analytical points to be made on the subject of the unravelling of the post-colonial states. Consider how the term fascist is now used about Assad by some on the left (and elsewhere). Historically the post-colonial regimes were associated with state-led, autarkic national development whose justification rested on the redistribution of wealth from the old colonial
power to the mass of the population in an effort to escape the continued control of imperialism. The extent to which such a model was a fraud is a question we do not need to address. What matters is that today these regimes are now totally degenerate even on their own terms, as Assad’s genocidal war to save his own regime so clearly indicates. Liberal complaints that the left was duped partake in the light-minded thinking that led to sections of the left supporting Assad in the first place. If only matters were so simple.

The dominant forms of left collusion with authoritarianism took the form of a ‘left’ nationalism replete with the hyper-secularism and hostility to minority identities we see all over the global South. Such an ideological outlook had roots in the modernist response to colonialism, but also involved a statist or elitist conception of progress or what has been described as a ‘pedagogic’ understanding of modernity. As a result the emergence of the mass of the population into active political life often takes the form of an embrace of identities repudiated by the state, such as the example of the Islamists in Turkey or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Of course these identities can end up forming the basis of a new repressive and reactionary social order and one possible terminus of the democratic revolution is a new undemocratic social order. But often the privileged elite social strata from which the liberals are usually derived joins hands with the old authoritarian state to ensure that the unenlightened masses are held down in their place.

In many respects the arguments about the identities of emergent political groups and the struggle for democracy in the global South mirrors the changing nature of debates about multiculturalism in Britain. Similarly a left that is incapable of adjusting to the autonomy of actual people with all their mores, problems, histories and so on, actually seeking to engage in the conversation on an equal basis, is left with no convincing alternative ground to the Liberals, Conservatives and patriarchal state authority whose constant injunction to refugees and migrants: “they must be educated to become good citizens and nationalists and respect the host secular culture before we will consider they have entered national political life.” This is rather different from the idea of unity in democratic struggle. The approach of sections of the French left that adds its voice to the national (and nationalist) chorus in telling its own Muslim citizens it must condemn the
attacks of *Charlie Hebdo* or frame its oppression in terms of class if it wishes to receive a sympathetic hearing about Mosques being firebombed.

**Socialism From Below**

Today the democratic wager means thinking through the meaning of ‘socialism from below’ in societies like post-colonial Syria, Egypt or further afield that are increasingly important engines of the global economy. The old discourse of post-colonial nationalism contained the seeds of its own dissolution. Our generation has witnessed the two-fold dissolution of post-colonial nationalism. Firstly, there was the unmaking of the post-colonial nation-states as elites removed barriers erected in the post-war decades and used the instruments of neoliberalism to dismantle the old social protection. Secondly, there was the unmaking of a left that held to an elitist, statist model of social change and progress. As a result the left is unable to account for how its theoretical and political positions became such a travesty. As the basic structures and patterns of political mobilisation in India unexpectedly unravelled in the early 80s, it was said that Indian political theorists now faced a strange and unfamiliar landscape. Four decades later and this is a universal—not simply an anomalous ‘peculiarity’ of Indian social development—in the era of the democratic revolution.

Earlier we touched on the ‘NGOisation’ of the left. The anti-war movement against Bush’s Iraq war drew NGOs into a movement that fell under the leadership of the left. The rise of Stalinism in the 1920s and 30s took place on the basis of the destruction of what remained of the 1917 October revolution, but that did not mean a return to the old world. This fact was largely what disorientated the left as the Russian counterrevolution continued to speak (what the left believed to be) the language of revolution. It was a novel form of counterrevolution that saw forced industrialisation and the atomisation of the working class go hand in hand with the roll back of early libertarian gains of the revolution. Millions of peasants with their conservative social mores were sucked into the cities as agriculture was collectivised. One crucial aspect of the Stalinist counterrevolution that would be significant in terms of its ideological heritage was the inversion of proletarian internationalism as the language of revolution.
Syria

was transformed into its opposite, into the language of order, though it would often remain clothed in the rebellious garb of the former. This novel ‘Proletarian Nationalism’ (as Nigel Harris called it), reconstructed ideology from old bourgeois materials—nationalism, patriarchy and so on, and amalgamated them with a desiccated Marxism-Leninism, so that for example it became expedient in defence of the Soviet state for the bureaucracy to identify the working class with the People, carrying the implication the bourgeoisie were a foreign excrescence who should be eliminated as they were not part of the proletarian nation. This immensely flexible ideological discourse meant that Stalinists and nationalists were not just rivals but could also be allies in that both could identify with the nation (though they could both identify with the nation yet still remain enemies). The demise of Stalinism and the state capitalist societies of Eastern Europe, and the dissolution of the post-colonial nation-states, means the end of waving the Red Flag for ‘world socialism’ or the anti-colonial national struggle for liberation. In the C21st ‘Human Rights’ became the new thing to support—a development that was obviously less satisfying than the older political loyalties—in part because as important as ‘Human Rights’ might be they are still abstract. The huge array of democratic struggles taking place leading right up to the threshold of the democratic revolution cannot simply be captured in all their diversity by the concept of ‘Human Rights’.

One problem is that we have an NGO milieu that is defined by its movement onto the traditional terrain of the left while the left has come from the opposite direction onto the terrain of the NGOs. For every left wing organisation incapable of breaking from the mistakes of its past due to being staffed by revolutionary lifers who form a full time apparatus reliant on payment from public sector white collar workers and those nesting in the trade union bureaucracy, there is an NGO bureaucracy engaging exactly the same kind of issues and individuals that any new left in the global South will necessarily be built from.

On the British left the possibility of operating as a leader without having an organisation, of moving from a subscription-based organisation with a stable membership, to an organisation sustained by endorsement and sponsorship, has been a major factor in creating new problems of bureaucracy in the movement. This is a symptom of the decline of collective forms
of struggle, of the precipitous fall in strikes and other forms of militant struggle, but also the ‘waning of collectivity’ (Raphael Samuel)—those forms of collectivism that had their roots in a particular working class experience in the workplace, in school, in political parties, trade unions, public housing and so on, and was nourished by class struggle. In other words we dismiss the view this trend is a result of conspiracy: the serious, difficult issues raised about the nature of organisation and the impact of the atrophying of social and collective struggles in the era of neoliberalism have their parallels elsewhere too in Britain, for example in the debates on the continued hold of Leninism on the far left. In Britain no one appears to want to discuss what is at the end of their fork or talk about the actual material basis of their existence and how it is socially reproduced; certainly not in relation to the organisations of the left. How much of a travesty is the present day politics of the left? Older methods of analysis are cast aside in the new dispensation where the political analysis of a leftist can instead be based on the idea the Royal family are lizards, with hysteria about ‘chem trails’ or a belief that Tupac was killed by the Learned Elders of Zion; but on international questions much of the left can still be counted on to reliably line up behind Russian foreign policy.

The left in Britain apes the worst habits of the NGOs. Often if you cannot explain the weaknesses of the social or national movements you support then it is impossible to build further support for them. The mirror of this problem is the NGO whose field of play, like the transnational corporation, cuts across international borders, and who arrogate to themselves an Olympian global role. Both phenomena are rooted in the absence of any real global movement with a real internationalist perspective—hence the ensuing binds are real binds that cannot easily be avoided.

These larger global weaknesses of the struggle are apparent in the decline of coherent nationalist and socialist ideologies in the struggle against oppression. Consider the Palestinian movement. Today it is split between two wings: an Islamist wing and a ‘secular’ wing (though this conceals a lot of other politics in both wings), this split has nonetheless made conventional solidarity politics quite difficult. Everyone can recognise oppression and suffering but it is much harder to orientate yourself in the world about you if you don't already have some sort of developed political position or framework. So if a gut reaction to suffering and oppression is
the point of departure for acquiring political commitment, only
the latter truly illumines the roots of any particular suffering or
oppression. The combination of these novel problems—shrinking
political horizons and the abandonment of any alternative model
of social organisation, and the rise of substitutionism—is a blow
against the overall coherence of the international solidarity
movement. No coherent programs of national economic
development or state autarkic reformism (state capitalism) exist
any more because of globalisation and neoliberalism. So what
dominates is a parody or travesty of the left—like the one party
state in Rojava ‘Commune’ that passes itself off as a libertarian
anarchist experiment.

In recent decades as the social struggle hit the wall, leftists
in the global North started to support anything placing the real
brutality and suffering beyond our minds. As Oscar Wilde put
it: “It is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to
have sympathy with thought.”

Conclusion

There is a poignancy about the decline indicated by the gulf
between those who once defended Stalin’s crimes because they
thought these crimes were at least bound up with the construc-
tion of socialism, and those defending Assad and Putin’s crimes
because they think it is linked with trade negotiations about the
status of the BRIC countries—a neat metaphysical argument
from the standpoint of the global masses given that none of the
BRIC countries is interested in anything other than raising the
rate of exploitation. So are we supposed to defend Putin’s crimes
for the sake of some notional second camp that comprises the
ruling class of India and Brazil? As the basis for reinventing
global radicalism such a vision is unlikely to consolidate an anti-
imperialist movement or any other kind of mass global move-
ment.

We must appreciate the importance of the social dimension
of social movements. Given that we live in the universe of late
capitalism we cannot ignore the fact that class as a self-conscious
class movement in the interests of the immense majority, is a
relatively marginal force in most parts of the world today. The
whole question of the working class deriving its power from col-
lective organisation at the point of production is an important
topic today. If this social power has been fatally undermined then we will need to rethink what we mean by class movements.

Intriguingly even recently in the MENA where we have seen large scale mobilisations of the working class as a collective power at the ‘point of production’, notably in Egypt for example, these struggles have had little impact on the nature of the outcome of the wider social struggle. This does not mean that class is no longer important in shaping social struggles. It is even possible that these struggles might require greater salience and traction in the future as they did in the past, though we should be wary of any argument that looks like the traditional leftist claim that reality will anyway become ‘true’ at some point in the near future. ‘Class’ is still important, but it is hard to sustain the argument in the robustly ‘classical’ guise of the working class showing signs of making the transition to being a ‘class-for-itself’ as Marx alluded to in, e.g., The German Ideology or The Communist Manifesto.

This is obviously a real dilemma for a number of reasons, not least because the working class struggle at the point of production gave a section of the left its conception of radical democracy. No one should blithely dismiss the class struggle at the point of production when discussing the class struggle as a whole. But at the same time treating all instances of radical political action and struggle as incipient struggles for socialism on the basis that the class struggle takes other phenomenal forms, is to risk sophistry especially if class struggle at the point of production appears to be in some sort of crisis. On the other hand, dismissing struggles because they are not struggles for socialism risks sectarianism.

The focus on class struggle at the point of production and related models of radical democracy, made up only a minority current within Marxism, related to other important developments in the wider workers movement—for example, Marx’s conclusion after the Paris Commune that it would be necessary to smash the bourgeois state and build an alternative, radically democratic state based on the power of the working class. This idea was retrieved from oblivion first by Anton Pannekoek in 1912 in a debate where the Dutch socialist challenged Kautsky’s gradualism as the basis of the ‘road to power’ for the German SPD, a debate not missed by Lenin, who returned to Pannekoek’s theme himself in State and Revolution (1917), that generalised the experience of Russian workers self-organisation in the 1905 Revolution and
February 1917, and anticipated aspects of the Soviet Power that would arrive fully born months later. The various currents and trends in Syndicalism (from Industrial Syndicalism to Anarcho-syndicalism) could also reckon on compelling visions of radical democracy based on the power of the working class organised at the point of production, more so than the Leninists (from the Syndicalist point of view) as their vision was unencumbered by the existence of the usurping Party as many syndicalist militants finally came to conclude about the experience of the Russian revolution and its aftermath. But this is not the place to adjudicate the controversy other than to note that the universe of the Second and Third Internationals resting as they did on a real proletarian challenge to the existing social order in Europe, and based on mass Social Democratic and Communist parties and trade unions, has entirely vanished and will not return. And Syndicalism itself is a social and historical phenomenon that required specific enabling conditions to flourish as a movement which it did in various parts of the globe since the last part of the C19th. Syndicalism even enjoyed a renaissance in the post-war years of economic boom in parts of Europe especially where the working class expanded rapidly as agricultural labourers left the land in for industrial, urban centres in countries such as Spain and Italy in the 1950s and 60s. Syndicalism was a sensitive barometer of the authoritarian factory floor dominated by the foreman and constant speed up while its ultimate fate was linked to the changing composition of this industrial working class and the cycle of capitalist trade and investment.

So the subject of radical democracy and the traditional view linking its possibility to workers collective power, conceived in terms of a specific understanding the working class, of its composition and so forth, may well have been more historically mediated and problematic than Marxists have usually admitted. Nonetheless that other related staple of Marxism, the idea of self-emancipation, has proven to have a far more popular provenance. So the Syrian revolution is only the latest revolution to show the enduring relevance of how those who make a revolution and organise from ‘below’ can create new social institutions that stand independently of the existing state machine. As Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami illustrate in their crucial book on the Syrian revolution *Burning Country: Syrians In Revolution and War* (2016), the nonviolent revolution that spread throughout
Syria’s urban centres saw the proliferation of hundreds of local coordinating committees (LCCs) that one activist described as an “underground parliament”. These LCCs were not quite the organs of direct democratic rule of the mass of the populace, but they were immensely popular. In the weeks and months after March 2011 the co-ordinating committees allowed grassroots activists to link with activists in neighbouring locales, thus leading to the emergence of a nationwide network of LCCs. These coordinating committees would prove immensely important in terms not only of organising the revolutionaries, but also the organisation of services, education, food distribution, access to healthcare and so on. Yet the possibility of a transition to broader democratic forms on the basis of the coordinating committees was violently curtailed by the brutal military onslaught of the Baathist state against the Syrian people. Assad’s violence forced the revolution to arm itself, setting in motion the fateful but unavoidable militarisation of the revolution. Yet even as late as August 29th 2011 the LCC’s issued a statement rejecting the ‘militarisation’ of the revolution as politically, nationally and ethically unacceptable. Unfortunately the massive scale of Assad’s violence increasingly made civil resistance impossible. Overall the LCCs promoted nonviolent, non-sectarian resistance and a political transition to a democratic Syria. Space prevents any deeper analysis of the coordinating committees but the interested reader should read Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami’s important account to get a flavour of their nature and role. Still it is clear that socialists and revolutionaries will be digesting the historic role of the Syrian revolution’s LCCs for quite some time to come.

Today asking what the idea of self-emancipation means in the universe of late capitalism is the key to a new radical theory of politics. If Leninism has become an antique irrelevance in the 21st it might still be argued there is a Lenin shaped hole in revolutionary politics that has in no way been filled—but then how could it have been? After all there is no revolutionary theory without the existence of a revolutionary movement. Marx remains a guide at the most general understanding of capitalism but much of what followed—the emergence of ‘Marxism’ or ‘classical Marxism’ as Isaac Deutscher characterised the common theoretical heritage of the Second and Third International—the codification of historical materialism and dialectical materialism
for the nascent workers movement by Engels, Plekhanov, Kautsky and the rest, is now at best a historical curio. Revolutionaries are a tiny minority in a historical context where the level of class struggle is very low and the bulk of political activity flows around issues of oppression rather than those of class. How should revolutionaries respond in such circumstances? In the most general terms it is clear we should not abandon our arguments or analysis, but neither should we treat the sort of struggles that currently predominate as the reason or cause of our ‘marginality’. In various ways this has been a key problem for the left in recent years.

Today we live in the era of democratic revolutions with uncertain consequences. The last four decades or so of neoliberalism was responsible for the decomposition of the working class shaped by the post-war years of economic boom, resulting in its fateful dissolution as a collective subject, though a cursory examination of the balance sheet at least indicates that neoliberalism cannot unravel its own contradictions or the deeper contradictions of global capitalism. The left needs to decide whether to wager on the social and political upheavals of the neoliberal era or stand back and wait for the real world to decide to conform to the old theories. We must make the democratic wager. If the contradictions of the present lead to more collective forms of social struggle then we win. If it does not work, that would prove that socialism had become a utopia and we must simply plunder what we can. Like Pascal’s wager on faith, we win either way.
With the ongoing offensive in Syria by the Assad regime and its backers there has been a renewed interest in Syria’s opposition. Despite the figure of 70,000 ‘moderate’ armed rebels being mentioned in the media and in parliament, much of the coverage still talks about al-Qaeda and ISIS, despite these being relatively modest forces in the conflict between the rebels and the regime.

Many commentators—including Independent columnist Robert Fisk,\(^1\) Stop the War Coalition (StWC) officer John Rees, and Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey—have mocked or denied the existence of moderate opposition forces. Criticisms that the rebels are not moderates,\(^2\) that they are a ‘rump’ with no support,\(^3\) that they are al-Qaeda or even Turkish fascists\(^4\) have all emerged. Part of the left is complicit in creating a narrative that the opposition are entirely al-Qaeda or ISIS, obscuring the fact

1. Robert Fisk, ‘Syria’s ‘moderates’ have disappeared. And there are no good guys’, *The Independent*, 4 Oct 2015.
that the overwhelming majority of Syrian rebels remain nationalists, whether of a democratic, secular or Islamic orientation.

This has created a situation where the resistance of Syrians to the Assad regime and Russian imperialism largely doesn’t exist for most anti-war and anti-imperialist activists. The coming to prominence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) / Daesh in 2014 has aided this, as the media’s overwhelming focus on Daesh’s atrocities has provided a diversion from the violence of the regime, and the much more numerous nationalist-democratic armed rebellion against it. Rather than counter this narrative, StWC and other ‘leftists’ have amplified it. Their arguments feed into the Russian narrative that they are only fighting Daesh and buries crucial truths about the tens of thousands of rebels who are engaged in a life or death struggle with the Assad regime and Russian imperialism.

This is immensely damaging because the Syrian armed rebels are responsible for preventing the military crushing of the revolution, and are a vital part of its defence against any imperialist imposed settlement in Syria, particularly the one being engineered through the Vienna ‘peace process’ which has the backing of all the imperialist powers. The rebels have demonstrated that despite some of them receiving funding from foreign backers, they are committed to a Syria independent of imperial powers, and have refused to compromise on core principles of the revolution, despite the hardships.\textsuperscript{5}

To understand the present situation of the armed rebellion, it is necessary to trace its roots, in the peaceful protest movement against the regime.

**Genesis of the Armed Rebellion**

It must be reiterated that Syria’s protests were largely peaceful for the first six months of the uprising. There were outbreaks of violence before then, but the overwhelming majority of the movement rejected the use of armed violence. The emergence of armed groups was a natural and predictable response to the indiscriminate violence inflicted on the peaceful protest movement from the very beginning. This cannot be understated.

\textsuperscript{5} 'The Five Principles of the Syrian Revolution', *Syrian Islamic Council*, 18 Sep 2015.
From the first protests, demonstrators were fired upon by the security services and snipers. On 8 Apr 2011, twenty seven protesters were shot dead in Daraa. On Apr 18, just a month after the protest movement emerged, the regime massacred dozens in the city centre of Homs, gunning them down as they staged a peaceful sit-in. Tanks were deployed against protesters in Daraa on Apr 23. By early May, the regime had infamously arrested and tortured to death thirteen year old Hamza Al-Khateeb. His body—burned, battered, shot and castrated—had been handed back to his family three weeks after he was detained at a protest in Daraa. These acts were repeated across Syria as the regime unleashed a wave of violence to break up the protest movement and prevent it achieving its ‘Tahrir Square’ moment.

Facing these abuses, rebellious towns and neighbourhoods formed groups—local men armed with whatever weapons they could find—that would patrol streets at night to deter incursions by the regime Shabiha (militia supporting Assad and the Ba’ath Party) and armed troops. The violence of the regime necessitated these organisations, but they were mostly for self-defence, and attacks on the regime were limited. This was the beginning of armed self-defence, but not the armed rebellion. Activists and protesters constantly reiterated their desire for a peaceful movement in the face of violent regime provocation.

In response to the peaceful uprising the regime pursued a dual strategy to militarise and sectarianise the conflict. First it targeted leading members of civil society, arresting lawyers, academics, doctors—any peaceful non-violent activists—to remove them from the movement and deprive it of their influence and experience.

Alongside this attack on civil society the regime released hundreds of Islamic radicals from Sednaya prison in May 2011. Ostensibly part of a ‘general amnesty’ in response to the revolt.

9. youtu.be/718tdQEXhWo
in reality these radicals were released in order to stimulate the formation of the armed ‘terrorist’ groups the regime claimed it was fighting. ¹¹ Many of these fighters were veterans of armed resistance in Iraq. When released they reconnected with their underground networks to form Islamic armed brigades. Senior defectors from the intelligence services reported the regime even facilitated the formation of armed groups, using the networks it originally established to funnel fighters into Iraq during the American occupation. ¹²

Finally the regime deployed sectarian language and violence against protesters, designed to inflame sectarian division and create a more favourable environment for radical Islamic groups. Protesters would be beaten and insulted by regime forces with sectarian slurs, and were forced to chant “there is no God but Bashar” while enduring torture.

While the regime deployed sectarian violence and released Islamic radicals as part of its strategy, the opposition had no united strategy on armed struggle. It was an organic response to the regime’s repression. There was no national coordination or overall direction to the process of taking up arms, and the issue of whether to undertake armed struggle was a live debate among activists across the country for many months.

This gave the opposition a fragmented, uneven and sometimes confusing character from the beginning. Rebel groups were founded by local men, from villages, towns, or working-class neighbourhoods. Defectors joined them where they could, seeking refuge from the regime that had officers performing field executions on all soldiers who wouldn’t follow ‘shoot-to-kill’ orders. ¹³ Thousands of soldiers and army officers were arrested on suspicion of sympathising with the revolution. Thousands more were tortured and killed. As more neighbourhoods and towns rebelled and the army was increasingly deployed directly against the people, more soldiers defected rather than shoot civilians. At

first these were individuals, but as the revolt grew, whole units began to defect.

The first officer to defect publicly was Hussein Harmoush, who fled to Turkey and announced his defection on 9 Jul 2011.\(^{14}\) Within weeks Harmoush was abducted by Turkish secret services\(^{15}\) and returned to Syria where he was tortured, forced to make a ‘confession’ on national television,\(^{16}\) and then killed.\(^{17}\) His example inspired others, and further defections laid the basis for the armed revolt.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was declared on 29 Jul 2011 by Colonel Riad al-Assad and six other officers who had escaped to Turkey. It was always more a label than a cohesive organisation with a command structure. Rebel groups adopted the name to signify their allegiance, but it lacked command structures due to the difficulty of organising inside Syria with the escalating repression. A Supreme Military Council of the FSA was formed which coordinated with the political opposition from December 2011. This was soon plagued by splits, with General Mustafa al-Sheikh leaving in February 2012 to form the Higher Military Revolutionary Council. On February 12th the Arab League announced a draft resolution allowing Arab nations to assist the opposition with financial aid and weapons. Qatar gave them $50 million to fund the FSA. Even with these funds, the disconnect between fighters on the ground and officers in exile, and between military and civilian wings of the opposition was already apparent.

Colonel Malek Al Kurdi deputy leader of the FSA declared in March 2012: “The SNC has failed us. We only buy our weapons from traitors in Assad’s army who want to make some money before the regime falls”. Al Kurdi insisted no weapons had been provided to them from external parties; “Soldiers who defect bring their personal weapons with them and whatever they can grab. Our FSA troops have

15. ‘The full story behind the abduction of a defecting officer of Syrian army’, Al Arabiya, 19 Sep 2011.
17. ‘Mass Torture Photo is likely for Hussein Harmoush’, Zaman Al Wasl, 1 Feb 2015.
conducted operations on several warehouses belonging to Assad’s army and confiscated stockpiles of RPG’s, machine guns, ammunition, and rifles.”

**From Guerrilla Resistance to Open War**

By this point the opposition was waging a large scale guerilla war on the regime. Their numbers had grown as thousands took up arms to try and liberate their towns, or protect their neighbourhood from attacks by the army and Shabiha. Bolstered by thousands of defectors, their daily attacks exhausted the regime forces. The regime was still desperately trying to repress the peaceful protest movement that continued under the protection of the armed groups, but its incursions into rebellious districts to capture protestors and defectors led to more defections and an emboldened insurgency. By February 2012 the death toll had passed 7,500 according to the UN, with tens of thousands more imprisoned.

With its strategies failing to halt the protests, and with the accelerating disintegration of the army the regime switched from political repression to population repression. The raids into rebel neighbourhoods to capture activists and defectors were halted. Instead the army laid siege to rebel areas and shelled them mercilessly, before subjecting them to full scale invasion by the army.

Homs was the first victim of this strategy. The residents of the rebellious Baba Amr district were surrounded and shelled for weeks before an invasion of the neighbourhood was launched in late Feb. Thousands were killed during the two month offensive and over 30,000 people were expelled from the area. British journalist Marie Colvin was killed by government shelling while reporting from a rebel held area, and the siege was captured on

film by BBC reporter Paul Wood in his *Panorama* report ‘Homs, Journey into Hell’.

Alongside this, the *Shabiha*, an irregular force of armed thugs in the pay of the regime,\(^\text{24}\) began to commit sectarian massacres against rebel towns and villages. Beginning during the Homs offensive, massacres were soon being committed across the country in an attempt to spark reprisals and stoke sectarian divisions. Over 200 civilians were killed on March 9 and 11 in the neighbourhoods of Ar-Ref’ia, al-Adawiya and Karm az-Zaitoun in Homs: forty four of them were children. On 2 and 9 April, Deir Ba’alba was attacked and 200 civilians killed.\(^\text{25}\) On Friday 25 May the Houla massacre was committed: 107 were killed.\(^\text{26}\) Those attacked tended to be Sunni residents in mixed areas, where different religious groups lived together. The attacks were intended to fracture the unity of the revolt and make it easier for sectarian forces in the opposition to commit reprisal attacks, setting off a spiral of sectarian violence.\(^\text{27}\) But there were no reprisals.

In spite of these provocations the uprising maintained its momentum and unity, and by mid-2012 it was estimated a quarter of the military had defected.\(^\text{28}\) The regime was forced to withdraw from many parts of Syria, unable to control the territory as hundreds of armed groups waged guerrilla attacks on its checkpoints and bases. Rural and eastern regions of the country were abandoned, and the Kurdish regions were handed over to administration by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).\(^\text{29}\)

The PYD was entrusted by the regime to administer the region due to its long standing relationship dating back to the 80s and 90s.\(^\text{30}\) The regime had allowed the PYD to maintain training
camps and operate as a legal political party because they were a convenient bargaining chip to use with Turkey. Despite the regime viciously repressing the PYD when ties with Turkey improved in the 2000s, arresting and torturing over a thousand of its members, it still trusted the PYD to control the Kurdish areas and prevent the opposition taking control. The failure of the opposition to fully support Kurdish rights early in the revolt gave the PYD the legitimacy to maintain a neutral position and, crucially, a non-aggression pact with the regime.

Areas controlled by the PYD were exempt from regime bombardment. State institutions remained largely intact, with the police and army still operating in the big cities of Qamishli and Hasakah. This cooperation between the regime and the PYD, and the presence of jihadists on the rebel side lead to frequent armed clashes between the rebels and the YPG (Kurdish People’s Protection Units).

With the regime retreating, the rebellion managed to take control of many large towns, and in a six week offensive managed to take control of half of Aleppo, the largest city in Syria. At this point the FSA was still the dominant force in the armed struggle.

Over one thousand different groups—estimated to number 150,000 strong—were active across Syria, organised by men from a particular town or neighbourhood, or formed by groups of defectors. Attempts were made to establish a command structure, but with limited resources and support it was impossible to create a viable structure in the midst of the carnage, and political differences and interference from regional powers obstructed this.

There were already signs that the rebels backers—primarily Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia—were interfering to frustrate their efforts. Rebels reported frequently that they would begin an offensive to liberate territory, and their backers would cease supplying ammunition.

FSA fighter Adham al-Bazi told the Guardian from Hama:

> Our main problem is that what we get from abroad is like a tap. Sometimes it’s turned on, which means weapons are coming and we are advancing, then, all of a sudden, the tap dries up, and we stop fighting or even pull out of our positions.  

The rebels had been promised a supply of arms and ammunition for the liberation of Aleppo. When the operation began on July 19th regime lines collapsed and the rebels took half the city in six weeks. Then their ammunition supply ceased. The offensive ground to a halt and the rebels were placed on the defensive—at one point they only had 600 bullets left to resupply their forces. Their lines held but they were stopped from completing the capture of the city. The regime was able to reinforce its positions, and Aleppo was divided in a stalemate.

While the media was reporting large scale arms shipments to rebels being monitored by the CIA, rebels on the ground denied receiving many arms. In an article from 6 March 2012, Ayham Al-Kurdi, a defected Free Syrian Army officer stated, "At first we got weapons from battling the [Syrian] army, then Lebanon helped with light weapons for a while. But then the Syrian army and Hezbollah started to block that route. If people want to know where our guns come from now, they're mostly from Syria itself."

The much quoted CIA involvement wasn’t to aid the rebels, but to control the flow of weaponry and prevent crucial heavy weapons and anti-aircraft missiles from reaching the rebels.

A weapons distributor in charge of the Damascus region was reported as saying in June 2012, “They are saying that there are weapons in depots here (in Turkey) but they won’t release them to us because we are not pledging allegiance to them. They want us to follow Saudi Arabia or a big organization like the Brotherhood. We are refusing this. That’s why the next batch of weapons has been delayed. Either we follow them, and get lots of weapons, or we don’t and die.”

With the regime on the defensive, the rebels main problems were a lack of weapons and resources, and the challenges of co-

32. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, ‘Syria civil war: ‘We expend the one thing we have, men. Men are dying’, The Guardian, 25 Sep 2012.
ordinating a chaotic insurgency. Attempts were made to create accountable leadership structures for the armed groups, but the opposition groups were never given control of the resources necessary to succeed. Regional backers controlled the flow of weapons, and demanded allegiance in return for supplies. Most rebels, valuing their autonomy, refused, so the situation persisted. Although more numerous and with popular support, without heavy weapons the rebels couldn't penetrate regime strongholds in the large towns and major urban centres.

An offensive was launched to capture Damascus in July 2012, and FSA units reached right to the city centre, but the regime managed to fend off the attack with support from Hezbollah and loyal military units. Without heavy weapons, and with no way of neutralising the regime’s air power the rebels were outgunned and defeated.

Once the regime regained control of Damascus, they began a campaign of collective punishment against the Sunni-majority suburbs which had sheltered the rebels. Whole neighbourhoods were razed to the ground and their populations expelled. Human Rights Watch documented seven instances of this in Damascus and Hama, but the practice was much more widespread, being inflicted upon opposition supporting villages, towns and neighbourhoods across the country.

The regime increased its attacks on civilians, with the first documented use of barrel bombs in August 2012. The regime also began targeting breadlines in opposition areas with bombs and artillery. These indiscriminate attacks were the regime’s desperate attempt to try and maintain control, to defeat the rebellion’s popular support by displacing the sympathising population. By December 2012 the regime was firing Scud missiles at residential areas. These attacks drove tens of thousands of

38. 'Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012-2013', Human Rights Watch, 30 Jan 2014.
41. Damien McElroy, 'Syria fires Scud missiles on its own people', The Telegraph, 12 Dec 2012.
civilian to flee rebel areas, accelerating the internal displacement that was soon to affect millions.\textsuperscript{42}

In a January 2013 article in \textit{Foreign Policy}, ‘Fund Syria’s Moderates’, Robin Yassin-Kessab laid out the disparity between rebels and regime that was causing a stalemate to emerge. The rebels had taken all the soft targets; rural towns, villages, and isolated army bases. Now they were attacking entrenched positions defended by loyal troops, and their lack of heavy weaponry, alongside poorly coordinated armed groups was proving an obstacle.

Unable to break through regime lines, and with atrocities against civilians mounting daily, General Salim Idriss, the head of the Supreme Military command of the FSA, went to Europe in March 2013 to ask for support in developing the FSA into a credible force. As detailed by British-Syrian journalist Rami Jarrah,\textsuperscript{43} who accompanied General Idriss, officials and politicians from the EU met FSA leaders, visited their bases, and discussed plans for transforming the military struggle, using it to pressure Assad into accepting negotiated political solution, and avoiding the regime collapse that the Western powers were so afraid of.

As the war dragged on, the FSA was losing men to better organised and funded Islamic armed groups backed by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, creating a divided and conflict ridden opposition.\textsuperscript{44} Jarrah writes; “Gen. Idriss found himself losing power as groups like al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham attracted fighters to leave the military fronts and join them, many for the simple reason of wanting to fight with weapons and not just uniforms and bullet proof vehicles which were boasted about when provided to the FSA by European states.”

Despite the FSA leaders’ pleas and detailed plans, the weapons and support from the EU never materialised. Instead the EU imposed an arms embargo on all groups in Syria, thereby propping up the existing power imbalance.

The US offered non-lethal aid, but this was little use against the regime, and more FSA men and units joined radical Islamic

\textsuperscript{42} Throughout 2013, 9500 Syrians were displaced per day according to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre. ‘Syria: Forsaken IDPs adrift inside a fragmenting state’, IDMC, 21 Oct 2014.
\textsuperscript{43} Rami Jarrah, ‘Why the FSA is Weak’, ANA Press/Facebook, 11 Feb 2015.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
groups. Abu Zeid, commander of FSA’s Syria Mujahideen brigade in Damascus which defected to Nusra with 420 men, said:

No one should blame us for joining al-Nusra. Blame the west if Syria is going to become a haven for al-Qaeda and extremists. The west left Assad’s gangs to slaughter us. They never bothered to support the FSA. They disappointed ordinary Syrian protesters who just wanted their freedom and to have Syria for all Syrians.  

Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN), estimated to have had just two hundred fighters when its nucleus entered Syria in late-2011, had by this time grown to 3,000-5,000 strong. ISIL groups began to appear, sent over from Iraq to recruit and lay down roots among the chaos. These groups had no problem sourcing funds, either from international jihadist networks in the case of JAN, or from its highly efficient smuggling and extortion rackets in Iraq in the case of Daesh.

Compounding this was the failure to construct accountable local government and reduce the chaos and lawlessness resulting from the collapse of state institutions. Secular and nationalist armed groups concentrated mainly on fighting the regime, leaving government to local councils of activists and community leaders. While in some places like the town of Daraya, local councils were able to assert democratic control over the armed groups, in many places the lack of resources, and infighting between rebels prevented this.

Starved of funds, some armed groups resorted to robbery and smuggling to fund their operations—imposing checkpoints and taxes on those travelling and trading—behaviour that was resistant to democratic control. Some took kickbacks from state employees in return for allowing them to sit at home, undermining public services and local government in rebel held towns. Assets like oil fields, factories and power plants were seized by groups and income from them used to pay for the armed struggle. This lead to warlordism and infighting as some factions grew rich

45. Ibid.
and powerful while others fought them for control of territory and assets. Islamic rebel groups were arguably better prepared politically. They created sharia courts and enforced justice and accountability through them. This created some stability and reduced lawlessness, and Islamic rebels gained a reputation as being less corrupt than nationalist or secular armed groups.

The major factor in preventing the stabilisation of rebel areas was the regime's constant bombardment and the ongoing fighting. Constant attacks on opposition state institutions disrupted their functioning, the loss of local populations to internal displacement or as refugees harmed local economies, it disrupted the provision of public services and the functioning of local councils. It crucially deprived civil society and non-violent activists of their support base, and strengthened the influence of armed factions, particularly hardline groups who gained legitimacy from the ongoing chaos, sectarian regime violence and massive destruction.

Descent into Chaos

The situation worsened throughout 2013. Hezbollah openly declared its intervention on the side of the regime, sending its troops to reinforce regime lines and launching an assault on rebel held Qusayr. Qusayr, a mixed Muslim-Christian town near the Lebanese border, was a beacon for the revolution. Positioned near a key supply route, following its liberation in mid-2012 the regime had not dared attack it. The opposition established a local council and organised the provision of public services, reopened schools and governed for the people. It was an example of the possibility of creating a free, democratic Syria.

Hezbollah intervened to smash this example of an alternative government and close the vital supply route for the rebels in Homs. In April the Syrian Army and Hezbollah launched an offensive that captured the surrounding towns and villages. By May Qusayr was besieged, subject to a fierce bombardment.

49. ‘Syrian forces, Hezbollah attack rebel-held Qusair’, France 24, 19 May 2013.
and assaulted with thousands of battle hardened Hezbollah soldiers. The rebels stood little chance, resisting bravely but eventually being overcome. Thousands of rebels and civilians were killed, and thousands more fled the town and surrounding villages. This was a serious defeat, closing the supply lines into Lebanon that rebels in central Syria were dependent on. The intervention of Hezbollah tipped the scales in the regime’s favour, and heralded the start of a series of losses for the rebels as their frontlines were driven back across the country.

Asked what would happen if Qusayr fell, Colonel Abdel-Hamid Zakaria, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army in Turkey, told Al-Arabiya television that Alawite communities would be “wiped off the map”. “We don’t want this to happen” Zakaria continued, “but it will be a reality imposed on everyone. It’s going to be an open, sectarian, bloody war to the end”.

Seized on by pro-Assad media as evidence of the rebels sectarianism, it was an accurate description of the dynamics of the conflict. The crushing of the revolutionary bastion by a Shiite armed group (Hezbollah) on behalf of a viciously sectarian regime would inflame sectarian tensions and give extremist voices more support in the uprising.

This was already happening. 2013 saw the first sectarian massacres by armed rebel groups; in Maksar Hesan in Homs in May, in Hatla village in Deir al-Zour in June, in Latakia suburbs in August 2013, and Sadd City in Homs in October. Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL were involved in these atrocities. At this point ISIL were still considered part of the armed rebels and some radical Islamic factions allied with them for offensives.

These were terrible crimes against humanity, and received widespread condemnation from all other armed groups and the political opposition groups. The attacks were a response to the regime’s sectarian massacres against the civilian population in all

published 5 Jun 2014, at youtu.be/qx-3XWfWQ6A.
parts of Syria in the preceding year. It has to be stressed that it was two years into the uprising, and only after enduring dozens of massacres themselves, that forces connected with the opposition responded to regime atrocities by perpetrating massacres.

It was a clear sign that brutal violence and oppression of the regime was degrading and corrupting the values of some of those who fought it. An example of this is Khalid al-Hamad (nom de guerre Abu Sakkar), a day labourer and peaceful protester who became infamous as the ‘cannibal rebel’. In May 2013 Abu Sakkar was filmed cutting a piece of flesh from the corpse of a regime soldier and eating it. This video was a propaganda gift for the regime, and was broadcast around the world as an example of the rebel’s inherent barbarity.

The BBC interviewed Abu Sakkar, and painted a different picture. He initially took part in peaceful protests in Homs and was filmed welcoming defecting soldiers with olive branches in June 2011. As violence escalated he took up arms against the regime. His brother and uncle were killed. His parents were arrested and tortured. The police rang him during the beatings so he could hear their screams. His neighbourhood was invaded and destroyed.55

Abu Sakkar said of his victim “This guy had videos on his mobile. It showed him raping a mother and her two daughters. He stripped them while they begged him to stop in the name of God. Finally he slaughtered them with a knife… What would you have done?”56

The regime’s extreme violence, and the isolation and abandonment of the rebels was creating a mentality whereby anything was permissible if it hurt the regime, or gave protection to rebels or civilians.57 Abu Sakkar continued:

We’re under siege, it’s been two years now, videos from the Shabiha [government militia] show many more terrible things than what I did. You weren’t too bothered. There wasn’t much of a media fanfare. You didn’t care. You suffer a fraction of what we suffered and you’ll do what I did and more.58

56. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
The rebels sense of abandonment by the international community was severe. This grew when Obama’s red line was revealed to be little more than a mirage.

**From Red Line to Disillusionment**

The regime counter offensive gained pace throughout 2013, culminating in the Ghouta chemical massacre in August. In an attempt to break the rebel lines around Damascus the regime used sarin gas against the population. Over 1400 people were killed in one night. The regime failed to break rebel lines, but it was a key turning point in the conflict.

The US and European governments failed to intervene, settling for a deal whereby the regime gave up its chemical weapons in exchange for no airstrikes. The rebels, expecting the regime’s airstrips to be bombed and a no fly zone implemented, were left shocked and disoriented. Democratic and nationalist forces, who had been relying on the US and EU to come to their aid, were left disillusioned and humiliated. Free Syrian army units began to defect to radical Islamic brigades, which had been warning all along about the West’s propensity to betray.

The regime and its backers now knew it had a free hand in Syria to slaughter the opposition unimpeded. It launched offensives across Syria, driving the opposition back. Many rebel held towns were encircled by the regime; Moadamiyeh, Daraya, Madaya, Zabadani, Eastern Ghouta and many others were besieged. The regime began its ‘kneel or starve’ campaign, cutting off all access to food and aid to the besieged areas until they surrendered or signed truce deals with the government.  

One of the regime’s offensives, in November 2013 in Aleppo, killed Abdel Qader Saleh. Saleh was a leading rebel figure in the North of Syria in the Tawhid Brigades, a democratic Islamic group. Saleh was part of the FSA command structure and a key link between Islamic groups and the FSA. Respected by all for his leadership, his death was mourned by many.

Following Saleh’s death, Islamic armed groups broke from the FSA structures and founded the Islamic Front in November

---

This created a separate, Salafist-led coalition to rival the FSA, and further entrenched division.

More extreme forces were growing in the chaos caused by the regime. Daesh was growing in strength, and actively spreading discord and chaos. They were already notorious for brutality and abuses of civilians in liberated areas. It regularly assassinated rebel commanders, seized their territory and suppressed civil society activists. Daesh was suspected of several attacks on the Kafranbel media centre and the attempted assassination of its director, Raed Fares. Kafranbel’s weekly demonstrations and creative English language banners have attempted to keep alive the spirit of the revolution, and were a regular target for repression by ISIL and al-Nusra. Initially, rebel groups attempted to appease Daesh to avoid a fight on two fronts, but Daesh’s behaviour forced their hand. In late December 2013 ISIL tortured to death a popular Ahar al-Sham commander, Dr Hussein Al Suleiman, known as Abu Rayyan. Abu Rayyan had gone to meet ISIS officials to try and negotiate a truce and end the rebel infighting. His body was returned to his men, brutally tortured. Following his murder, civilian revolutionary groups called a day of protest on January 3rd against ISIL’s authoritarian practices and in memory of Abu Rayyan.

Mass protests happened across Syria as tens of thousands launched a revolution within the revolution to reject Daesh’s brutality and sectarianism. In coordination with the protests, rebel groups launched assaults on Daesh checkpoints and bases across the country. FSA and Islamic Front units fought together against Daesh, and even Jabhat al-Nusra was intimidated into joining the revolt against Daesh for fear of receiving the same treatment itself. In the space of six weeks the rebels had driven Daesh out of Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Raqqa province. They hung on in Deir al-Zour Province, near the border with Iraq, but their

---

63. Leila Al-Shami, ‘Revolution within the revolution: The battle against ISIS’, Leila’s Blog, 7 Jan 2014.
presence in most of Syria was smashed. As Daesh retreated from Syria they retaliated by slaughtering many of the civil society and democratic activists they had imprisoned in their dungeons.

The regime took advantage of the fight against Daesh to launch offensives in the west of Syria, as well as bombing rebel lines when they were fighting Daesh. One of these regime offensives captured the important town of Yabroud near the Lebanese border, which had been under rebel control for almost two years, destroying the rebel stronghold there.64

Daesh pulled its forces back into Iraq, regrouped and launched an offensive against Mosul. The Iraqi army, hugely corrupt and with low morale, collapsed and fled and Mosul was seized. Daesh raided Iraqi army depots and gained high quality US weapons and equipment. Due to the vicious sectarianism of the Maliki regime and its brutal crushing of the Iraqi spring, Daesh was greeted like a liberating army by Sunni parts of the population. Bolstered with thousands of new recruits, with a regional capital under its control and powerfully armed, ISIL returned to Syria as a powerful occupying army. They captured much of Deir al-Zour province and Raqqa and advanced almost all the way to Aleppo before they were halted. They declared their Islamic State with Raqqa as its capital on June 30.

This episode was a huge blow to the revolution, which had now lost almost half of Syria to Daesh. Men and resources which were badly needed for the fight against the regime were now in ISIS hands. Towns and cities which had been centres of revolutionary activity like Raqqa, Minbej and al-Bab were now occupied by Daesh, and their fledgling democratic organisations were crushed. In Minbej, the populace resisted ISIS.65 The revolutionary council of the town called for a general strike against ISIS' rule.66 The first workers union in Free Syria, formed at the enormous flour mill which was the centre of the town’s economy, struck and protested against attempts by Daesh to seize control of the mill and take the profits for themselves. After several weeks they were crushed with immense brutality.

66. ‘Inside the Minbej General Strike Vs ISIS: Interview with local council President’, Watanili, reposted on Not George Sabra blog, 23 May 2014.
Still Syrians resisted their tyrannical rule. A group of media activists in Raqqa formed a media collective called Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS) to report on and draw attention to Daesh crimes. Daesh has viciously targeted citizen journalists, executing many and even sending double agents into Turkey to murder RBSS activists living there.

In August 2014 in Deir al-Zour province, the pro-FSA Sheitat tribe staged an armed uprising against Daesh. Civilians held protests calling for the ousting of Daesh, and Daesh was expelled once more from towns and villages along the road between Deir al-Zour and Iraq. Victory was shortlived however. With the rebels weakened by Daesh and the regime’s advance, no one could come to their aid, and Daesh sent reinforcements from Iraq and Raqqa. The uprising was crushed and seven hundred men from the Sheitat tribe were murdered in a mass execution. This is the single largest execution to have occurred during Syria’s civil war.

Having seized most of Free Syria from the rebels, Daesh then launched an offensive against Kobane, then controlled by the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG). This was when the group became known worldwide, even though Syrian rebels had been fighting ISIL already for eight months. The siege of Kobane received international media coverage as Daesh attempted to take the small Kurdish town on the border with Turkey. The US was eventually pressured into assisting the YPG with airstrikes by political pressure from Turkey and public protests around the world organised by Kurdish solidarity organisations.

No solidarity was forthcoming for the Syrian rebels who were fighting both the regime and Daesh.

US Support—From non-Lethal to Co-option

Despite the YPG being the main recipients of US military aid in the form of weapons and airstrikes, the regular refrain from the media and analysts is that the rebels are ‘Western’ or ‘CIA’ backed. Yet the Obama administration’s drip feeding of aid to

the rebels hardly qualifies as serious backing. The US has given small amounts of support to the rebels, publicly sending them non-violent aid from mid-2012, while a covert CIA programme was started in 2013 to provide arms and training to rebels via bases in Turkey and Jordan. Although there are no exact figures on the total number of rebels trained by the CIA (in October 2013 the Washington Post described the covert programme as ‘minuscule’ and reported less than 1,000 had been trained so far\(^69\)) estimates put it at no more than 10,000 receiving US-supported training over the course of the five year conflict.

In the context of the entire armed insurgency, which at its height in 2013 mobilised from 150,000-200,000 men, this is a tiny proportion of the rebels, and did nothing to turn the conflict in the rebel’s favour, or create functioning ‘proxy’ forces for the US among the rebels.

A former US intelligence officers admitted the training was little more than ‘basic infantry training’ and was simply aimed at shoring up those groups aligned with the FSA Supreme Military Council.

Rather than a serious attempt to support the rebels overthrowing the regime, this aid was meant merely to cultivate a small pro-US faction who would be US allies in the event the revolt was successful on its own, while creating avenues to maintain the conflict if they so chose. This strategy was advocated openly; Edward N Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International studies wrote in the New York Times in August 2013, “a prolonged stalemate is the only outcome that would not be damaging to American interests... Maintaining a stalemate should be America’s objective. And the only possible method for achieving this is to arm the rebels when it seems that Mr. Assad’s forces are ascendant and to stop supplying the rebels if they actually seem to be winning.”\(^70\) Alon Pinkas, former Israeli Consul General in New York put it more bluntly “Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that’s the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there’s no real threat from Syria.”\(^71\)

---

Mid-way through 2013 the US finally agreed to provide arms publicly to rebel brigades to fight Assad, but this was quickly withdrawn when Islamic rebel groups raided the arms depots of US-supported groups. The US-supported groups complained that the US paltry level of support meant they were too weak to defend themselves, and they were left politically isolated and discredited when the US failed to intervene following the Ghouta massacre.

The rebels were then largely left to fend for themselves by the US from spring 2014 onwards, until the expansion of ISIS into Iraq and establishment of the ‘caliphate’ spurred another attempt by the US administration to engage with them, this time to attempt to coopt them entirely.

In September 2014 US Congress voted to give Obama authority to start training Syrian rebels to fight ISIL. While the initial resolution mentioned the need to train rebels for the purposes of defending the Syrian people against attacks by the regime, this was removed by Congress and the final document made no mention of the regime. The purpose of the program would be for:

1) Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.
2) Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.
3) Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.

The programme met with widespread mockery and derision from rebel groups, who saw it as a transparent attempt to turn them into US proxies. Many refused to engage at all with the programme, and even those that did soon quit in disgust at the constraints placed on them.

“The revolutionary armed groups are not ready to join the training plan because it is only against ISIS”, said Oussama Abu Zayd, a military and legal adviser for several of the rebel groups in Aleppo that were once affiliated with moderates but have since disbanded because of a lack of international, especially US,

support. “In Syria we have two enemies, the Bashar Assad regime and ISIS. We can’t join any plan to fight ISIS without Assad because he killed our children in Aleppo with barrel bombs and put so many of our neighborhoods under siege.”

Wawi, a commander with the Free Syrian Army responded to the ‘train and equip’ proposal: “We don’t really need more training. And we have enough soldiers. What we need are quality weapons… We need anti-aircraft weapons. We need anti-tank weapons. If we don’t get those, we can’t win, no matter what the United States does”.

Despite these reservations, a reported 3700 rebels volunteered for the programme, of which only 800 were approved by the trainers. To be approved rebels had to pass a vigorous selection process where they were subject to multiple interviews over several days to ensure they would not use their training and weapons to fight the regime. A rebel commander withdrew his 1000 men from the programme when they were asked to sign a contract binding them to not use their weapons or training against the regime: “We submitted the names of 1,000 fighters for the program, but then we got this request to promise not to use any of our training against Assad,” Sejari, a founding member of the Revolutionary Command Council, said. “It was a Department of Defense liaison officer who relayed this condition to us orally, saying we’d have to sign a form. He told us, ‘We got this money from Congress for a program to fight ISIS only.’ This reason was not convincing for me. So we said no.”

After only succeeding in graduating 60 rebels, the programme collapsed soon after the first batch entered Syria in June 2015. Adopting the name ‘Division 30’, they entered Syria and were attacked almost immediately by Jabhat al-Nusra, who killed and arrested several fighters. Local FSA brigades negotiated their release and they were briefly allowed to join the frontlines at North Aleppo, but the US backing they were promised never materialised. The close air support that had been pledged to help

---

74. ‘Syria’s rebels say they need weapons, not training’, World Bulletin, 15 Sep 2014.
the rebels against ISIS was limited to half a dozen airstrikes over the space of a week, a purely symbolic gesture.

A second batch of rebels from the training programme were then deployed to Syria, and they promptly handed a portion of their equipment over to Jabhat al-Nusra in exchange for safe passage through the region, and their commander declared they would operate as an independent brigade, no longer associated with the US. The Syrian rebel commander overseeing the training programme resigned, listing numerous failings with the programme, and it was then abandoned by the US, with the remaining funds and equipment being given to the YPG.

Regroup, Reorganise, Conquer

The rest of 2014 was a bad period for the rebels. Iran intervened more openly, deploying thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) to support regime troops and Hezbollah. They enlisted shia militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq to bolster regime forces that were exhausted and demoralised.

Iran bankrolled the formation of the National Defence Force (NDF), a loyalist militia predominantly drawn from the Alawite sect. The NDF was used to garrison towns and free up SAA forces for offensives. Estimated to be 150,000 strong, the NDF was equipped with material from the SAA, and had a separate command and control structure. This created conflicts between regime forces, as the SAA was robbed of material to equip the NDF, and its poorly paid conscripts were moved out by well paid NDF militiamen.

Assad declared in mid-2014 that they would end the civil war within six months, and launched an offensive to encircle rebel-held Aleppo. This offensive, like all the others, failed. The regime was unable to cut the rebels’ supply routes and complete the siege.

Rebels held out and regrouped. Following their disillusionment with the West, they set out to be more self-sufficient, with the realisation that no serious assistance would come from there. By December 2014 the US had cancelled all plans to further fund and equip the armed opposition to Assad. “The Americans are saying they are not cutting us off, that the Saudis and Qataris are cutting us off,” said a senior FSA official in the northern Syria. “But we know the Americans are in charge.”

In contrast, the opposition’s regional backers began to seek agreement. Rather than back competing factions, they began to assist rebel attempts at unity. In the south, Jordan assisted with the formation of the Southern Front, a coalition of several dozen FSA factions, claiming 25,000 fighters between them. The Southern Front reached agreement on a transitional programme for a political solution, involving the departure of Assad and the institution of a democratic civil state. They also refused to cooperate with jihadist factions like al-Nusra and excluded them from military operations. The Southern Front secured a string of victories, liberating most of Daraa province between March 2014 and March 2015, culminating in the liberation of the town of Busra al-Sham with its historic Roman ruins. In a marked contrast to ISIS’s treatment of Syria’s historic monuments, rebels were filmed singing, dancing and celebrating their victory in the ancient ruins.

In Aleppo, an FSA alliance was formed called Fatah Halab. Like the Southern Front, they too excluded Jabhat al-Nusra, which was forced to form its own, smaller Islamic coalition called Ansar al-Sharia. Fatah Halab undertook several operations around Aleppo, taking back key areas, but despite isolating and refusing to work with JAN, they received no support from the US or EU.

83. SMO Syria, 4 Apr 2015. Available at youtu.be/hMjch13Bpsc.
The Islamic Front sought to moderate its politics and distance itself from the sectarian violence and rhetoric some of its component groups had engaged in during 2013. It adopted the Revolutionary Covenant, supporting human rights and committing itself to a multi-sect, multi-ethnic peaceful, just and lawful Syrian government once the regime was gone.\(^8^5\)

In Idlib province in the north, a new military coalition was formed in early 2015, Jaysh al-Fatah, the Army of Conquest.\(^8^6\) The core of Jaysh al-Fatah was Ahrar al-Sham, the largest group in the Islamic Front, but it united Free Syrian Army factions along with hardline jihadist factions like Jabhat al-Nusra and Jund al-Aqsa. Jaysh al-Fatah was able to marshall 12,000-15,000 fighters.

Rebel unity paid dividends. In the space of three months Jaysh al-Fatah liberated Idlib city and drove the regime completely out of Idlib province.\(^8^7\) The coalition then began the slow march towards Hama City. Advancing slowly but steadily under continuous regime airstrikes, the rebels inflicted a series of defeats on Syrian army troops. Jaysh al-Fatah advanced to within 20km of Hama.

The regime was close to defeat, relying increasingly on foreign sectarian militias to do its fighting, and Assad even making public statements that they would be unable to retake parts of the country. Draft dodging was still taking place on a massive scale as thousands avoid conscription into the army, even from ‘pro-regime’ communities.

If Jaysh al-Fatah had reached Hama and engaged in a battle for the city it would have ruined plans for maintaining the regime. Hama is famously anti-regime. It is where some of the largest anti-regime protests took place. Taking Hama would have critically weakened the regime’s hold on the centre of the country, and ruined any plan for partition to preserve the regime.

The Russian intervention has been merciless. They have intensified the regime’s strategy of depopulating rebel held areas,

---

87. Ibid.
targeting vital infrastructure like hospitals, schools, bakeries, markets, water treatment plants and grain silos.

The bombing has wreaked destruction on the civilian population—displacing 300,000 people, cutting off fresh water for 1.4 million and reducing aid supplies by 80%88—and now it is beginning to turn the tide of the military struggle. The major supply route between the Turkish border and Aleppo has been cut by a regime offensive led by Iranian-backed militias, and the rebels in the North Aleppo countryside are encircled and under assault by the Kurdish YPG from the west, regime forces supported by Russian airpower from the south, and Daesh from the east.

With the regime struggling to militarily defeat the rebels, even with the intervention of Russia and Iran, the imperialist powers hope to defeat what remains of the revolution through the Vienna ‘peace’ plan. By taking Assad’s removal off the table, and bullying the rebels into the process through threat of force and withdrawal of aid, they hope to inspire splits and infighting enough to weaken to rebels and defeat them, or force a settlement which maintains the regime, with or without Assad.

It remains to be seen whether the rebels will willingly enter the trap of the Vienna process. They have been offered nothing by the process, and while the imperialist powers are trying to bully them into it, they have shown a remarkable resilience the last four years, and an ability to keep fighting and winning against overwhelming odds.

Those concerned with the Syrian revolutionary war will be more than familiar with the line from self-proclaimed anti-imperialists that they can’t support the Syrian rebels because ‘the rebels are supported by imperialism’. In its crudest form this narrative holds that the rebels are ‘proxies of imperialism’, stooges of forces deemed to be in the wrong ‘camp’; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. This is irrational.

First, this position is wielded not analytically but rather as a means to deny support for the Syrian rebels, or avoid scrutiny of the revolution in general. It is a position shaped by counter-revolution, Eurocentrism and isolationism rather than radical politics. In different circumstances the position is bolstered by sectarianism and Islamophobia, apparently justified within this particular species of ‘anti-imperialism’ in the Syrian context.

Second, it is misleading as a description of the kind of support the rebel forces have received from countries deemed ‘imperialist’ over the course of the Syrian revolutionary war. While it’s true that certain rebel brigades fighting Assad have received weaponry from the US, the superpower’s actual role has really been as an arbiter of what the rebels can and cannot receive from US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Libya.

As is well established, the US currently enforces an embargo on rebel forces receiving anti-aircraft MANPADS (Man-Porta-
ble Air Defence System).\textsuperscript{1} These weapons could overcome Assad’s air force (as they did Gaddafi’s in Libya), which has been the main instrument used to terrorise civilian areas, creating a massive refugee problem while giving the regime the upper hand on the battlefield. However, for the US in other circumstances these weapons could also be turned against its regional allies, especially Israel, so the revolution is denied them.

But all this obscures the fact that the vast majority of Syrian rebels have not been armed by ‘imperialism’ at all. At the moment when Barack Obama began to focus US attention on the rise of Daesh he was accused by some of indirectly facilitating this by failing to arm ‘moderate’ rebels. The accusations were correct. The US watched as Daesh overran poorly-equipped rebel positions and did literally nothing when the rebels launched a counter-offensive\textsuperscript{2} that produced some successes until they were caught out\textsuperscript{3} by the Assad regime when its forces—backed by Hezbollah and Iranian-funded ultra-sectarian Shiite militias like Badr and Asayib Ahl al-Haq—took Yabroud. A consummately slippery Obama dodged questions of principle, countering the charge that the US had not supported the rebels enough by de-riding the idea that the rebels could ever be a legitimate fighting force capable of stopping Daesh, famously dismissing them as “farmers and pharmacists”.\textsuperscript{4}

In a sense, Obama was not wrong. The rebels are mostly comprised of civilian volunteers who took up arms following the regime’s attempts to crush the civil uprising, though the rebel’s core contains tens of thousands of Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldiers who defected. Most of the rebel’s weaponry is what the defectors managed to bring with them from the SAA, was won on the battlefield or as a result of raids on military bases.

I remember speaking to a friend who fought with a Free Syrian Army brigade in and around Damascus. We discussed the subject of how the revolution was perceived in the West among ‘my friends’, by which he meant fellow leftists. I told him that

\textsuperscript{1} blogs.rollcall.com/five-by-five/house-votes-to-ban-some-but-not-all-weapons-for-syrian-rebels/?dcz=
\textsuperscript{2} reuters.com/article/2014/01/04/us-syria-crisis-fighting-weapons-for-syrian-rebels/?dcz=
\textsuperscript{3} maysaloon.org/2014/03/why-yabroud-fell.html
\textsuperscript{4} washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2014/06/26/are-syrian-opposition-fighters-former-farmers-or-teachers-or-pharmacists
many of them were convinced that fighters like him were prox-
ies of imperialism and were being armed by imperialist forces—
‘inshallah’, came the (only partially sarcastic) reply.

But what exactly would be wrong with Syrian rebels receiv-
ing weapons from ‘imperialism’? The only people who find it a
problem are those for whom sourcing weaponry will never be a
problem. That might sound like a cheap point, but it’s a cheap
point worth making because for so many ‘imperialism’ is a word
they often use but rarely ever comprehend concretely, reserving
it instead for hysterical denunciations, sloganeering or facile aca-
demic detachment. What is being protested here is not ‘imperial-
ism’ at all but rather a simplistic worldview in which everything
exists in permanent abstraction allied to dogma. This attitude
accompanies the cottage industries and lucrative peer groups as-
associated with the left that allows only the narrowest spectrum
of disagreement on a range of subjects related to ‘imperialism’,
while Syria itself is of relatively minor importance (with igno-
rance prevailing) and wherein everything from NATO’s success-
ful No Fly Zone (NFZ) in Libya to the fact less than 500 Syr-
ian rebels received US issued Colt .45 pistols and binoculars is
equated with the US-UK invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In these circumstances, despite the complexity of global com-
petition and the interplay between different nation states and
hegemonic actors, the main tendency is not a new era of theori-
sation on the subject of imperialism based on the actual strug-
gles taking place but rather a retreat into dogmatic conservatism
and/or absurd, reactionary conspiracy theories. Russia Today
and Press TV are deemed reasonable, their propaganda served up
as a supposed antidote to the propaganda of the West (a trend
for which we can thank Bush, Blair and their non-existent Iraqi
weapons of mass destruction).

In this context the Syrian liberation struggle is seen through
the lens of these dastardly deeds. Also, bogus historical analo-
gies like the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan (an event steeped
in so much mythology for the left that its historical accounts
have been colonised by fiction) are dragged out to bolster the
idea that the Syrian opposition’s relations with ‘imperialism’ are
part of some grand nefarious plot. It transforms necessity into a
political relation that simply doesn’t exist or make sense in mate-
rial terms. My argument since the revolutionary war began has
been that the rebels would have to actively get arms from wher-
ever they could. Given that there has never been an anti-imperialist bloc, but rather just competing imperialist and hegemonic regional blocs, this forced the Syrian opposition to look towards the Western states, to those who could, if they chose, provide the best weapons in the highest quantities.

So what is ‘necessity’ in this context? There is a very good example if we compare the difference in the quality and quantity of aid received by the rebels and Assad’s regime. The Syrian rebels starting from scratch (they had few heavy weapons, no heavy vehicles, lacked coherent command structures and had limited amounts of communication equipment) have received approximately $3 billion in aid from Qatar from 2012-2013, with Saudi Arabia providing inconsistent shipments of mostly light weaponry since late 2012.

On the other hand, Assad’s forces—already part of a functional state with massive weapons stockpiles (including chemical and biological), thousands of tanks and armoured vehicles, brutally efficient air force, a well-run command structure with state of the art communications—received $15 billion worth of financial and military aid from Iran in 2013-2014 alone. This figure does not even take into account the intervention of Iranian forces whether through its own Revolutionary Guards and Basij militia, or its various proxy militias from Iraq or its Afghan and South Asian mercenaries, let alone Hezbollah—another Iranian-funded outfit that has invaded Syria. It’s important to note that Iran’s intervention in Syria began in the first few months of the revolution, before the opposition took up arms against regime forces, and has escalated ever since.

This is the disparity. There has been a tiny amount of aid from the ‘Friends of Syria’ to the Syrian rebels. We know what the Gulf states could do if they wished to, as we saw during the Arab Spring with the Peninsula Shield Force’s—the joint military force of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—counter-

5. articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/12/world/la-fg-syria-funding-20140112
7. bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad
8. naameshaam.org/report-iran-in-syria
revolutionary intervention on behalf of the Bahraini regime, or presently with Al-Saud’s brutal, large scale intervention against Ansar Allah in Yemen. Also in both Iraq and Syria bombs and missiles from Saudi, Qatari and Emirati war planes are dropping on Daesh positions while sharing the same airspace as Assad’s air force: Assad’s planes are untouched while his ground forces continue with their brutal business safe in the knowledge they will not suffer air strikes.

Pushing irony to its breaking point is GCC involvement in the US-led coalition’s campaign in Syria and Iraq that is actually conducted on behalf of one of Assad’s major allies—the sectarian Iraqi regime. Not only do Iranian-run militias lead the counter-insurgency on the ground and benefit from Gulf airstrikes, but without the rule of the Islamic Dawa Party in Iraq, Iran would never have been able to intervene on behalf of Assad’s regime. Friends of Syria? They have a funny way of showing it.

When GCC and US planes begin striking Ba’athist targets, we might be able to talk about Gulf or ‘Western’ support for the rebels in the same terms as Iranian support for Assad with a straight face. I think it’s safe to assume that this moment will never come.

The only real advantage the rebels have enjoyed is superior manpower, which incidentally dispels the narrative of some anti-imperialist leftists who said the problem in Syria was that the Assad regime had a massive popular basis, while the revolution had run out of steam. This has never been true, but even if it were, while it would be important, it would not invalidate the cause of those forces trying to overthrow the criminal Ba’athist tyranny. But we reiterate—the opposite is true. The revolutionaries are not running out of locals willing to fight for their freedom, while Assad’s manpower problem is so severe that he even mentioned it recently in a public speech, and also mentioned the increase in Iranian military forces and foreign jihadist militias, declaring that “Syria isn’t for those with a Syrian identity or passport, but those who defend it”.

10. alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/7/14/the-iranification-of-syria
power with extremely scarce resources, while the regime has an abundance of resources with extremely scarce manpower.

In truth the rise of Daesh has served to solidify the regime’s base (while creating dissension among Alawites) but given the fundamentally sectarian structure of the Ba’athist security state it was always likely that the revolution’s fate would rest on penetrating the Alawite minority. This has failed to happen, so civil war erupted. But those who claim the majority of Assad’s forces and support are Sunni Syrians, completely skate over the obvious sectarian and communitarian basis of the NDF, which does most of the fighting, while the depleted SAA, comprising ultra-loyal Alawite-led brigades (often commanded by members of the Assad dynasty), play the role of supplementary forces.

The true extent of the manpower gulf can be best be discerned in two ways:

1) The fact that Assad has had to demobilise two thirds of the Alawite-led but Sunni dominated SAA,\(^\text{11}\) instead relying on ultra-loyal divisions often commanded by cousins and cronies while also employing a tactic perfected by his father Hafez al-Assad during the last period of state slaughter when Assad senior crushed the Ikhawan led insurgency in the 1970s and early 1980s. Then ultra-loyal brigades and commanders were attached to regular army forces largely comprised of Sunnis and reinforced by *Shabiha* death squads. This combination kept defections to a minimum. However, during a popular revolution involving a ‘counter-insurgency’ strategy that requires ethnic cleansing of Sunnis and the mass killing of civilians, the rot cannot be stopped indefinitely. In the early days of the war, when Assad relied more on the SAA, there was a wave of defections (which led to the creation of the Free Syrian Army in 2012), forcing Assad to demobilise most of it.\(^\text{12}\) Instead of merely utilising *Shabiha* forces, Assad was forced to take the unprecedented step of allowing Iran to create and train a super-*Shabiha* known as the National Defence Forces (NDF), which was intended as an alternative to the severely impaired SAA, and was built on

11. understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime
an entirely sectarian and communitarian basis. But even the few Sunni brigades that were used have been racked by defections and desertions, while the pool of conscripts has almost dried up with widespread draft-dodging. Most worrying for Assad, this dissension is also becoming commonplace among Alawites, who are his only solid support base.

2) In 2014, after the rise of Daesh and the fracturing of the FSA due to internal divisions, caused by lack of resources and factional infighting, the rebels were in complete disarray. The Assad regime was very much on the offensive—Ba’athist, Iranian regime and Hezbollah mouthpieces all declared the war won, while a few pro-Assad leftists celebrated the regime’s apparent triumph over ‘the terrorists’ (never let these people criticise ‘neocons’ again) and hailed Assad’s ‘election’ triumph. While pointing to regime victories in places like Homs, they should have been looking at the nature of the victories. They were far from total. The limited manpower of the regime and its reliance on foreign fighters meant that these victories were only ever going to be limited to key areas. This was no victory at all. No breakthroughs. Just temporary shifts in stalemates in different theatres of war.

Despite the Assad regime’s alleged ascendancy this period was notable for the fact that though the rebels were at a low ebb, facing the lesser but still deadly fascism of Daesh as well as the regime, Assad failed to capitalise further. The reason was simple—he didn’t have the manpower or the popular support that would have allowed him to do so. For Assad to retake all of Syria a massive land invasion of the country by the Iranian Armed Forces and its proxy militias would be needed and this, of course, will never happen.

Nowhere can this be seen so clearly as Free Aleppo, where the regime, backed up by the foreign invasion forces of the Iranian

13. wsj.com/articles/syria-armys-weakness-exacerbated-by-draft-dodgers-1433544837
15. dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2694057/assad-declares-victory-push-topple-tenuous.html
Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, the sectarian head-drillers of Asayib Ahl al-Haq and various mercenary forces, not only failed to capture the jewel in the revolution’s crown, but provoked a successful rebel counter-offensive.

Indeed, after the regime’s self-proclaimed ‘victory’, the rebels began a new tactic of forming joint operations rooms, bringing together often ideologically disparate forces for the sole purpose of overthrowing the regime and chasing out the invasion forces, whether the so-called Islamic State or the Islamic Republic, the self-proclaimed Khilafat, or the self-proclaimed Party of God. This tactic allowed the rebels to defend Free Aleppo and make gains against regime positions, leading to the current offensive led by the joint operation room called Fatah Halab (Conquest of Aleppo), containing a multitude of revolutionary forces, including the proponents of Islamic democracy Liwa al-Tawhid (Unity Brigade) and several secular nationalist FSA brigades.

Far from these forces being ‘supported by imperialism’, they regrouped on a self-sufficient basis, pooling resources and prioritising their shared goals over ideological quibbles, with the overriding goal of liberating Aleppo from both Daesh and the Assad regime. In March 2015 in Idlib, a similar phenomenon occurred when the newly created joint operation of Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), led by the hardline Islamist Ahrar ash-Sham (Free Men of the Levant), along with democratic forces such as Faylaq ash-Sham (Sham Legion), liberated the city from the NDF, SAA and Hezbollah.

While most Syrians celebrated this news, most ‘anti-imperialists’ either completely ignored this sign of the revolution’s life, or tailed the Islamophobic Western media lamenting the ‘fact’ that ‘al-Qa’ida’ had struck another blow against Assad. I remember watching videos of civilians in Idlib celebrating as Jaish al-Fatah fighters entered the city, tearing down statues of Hafez al-Assad, as well as regime and Hezbollah flags, and releasing prisoners who had been locked up in regime dungeons, and the

17. nytimes.com/2015/02/19/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-regain-territory-near-aleppo.html?_r=0
18. archiecountry.com/2015/06/18/infographic-fatah-halab-military-operations-room-coalition-of-31-rebel-factions-syria/
contrast with the grave tone of Western media coverage and the hysteria of the pro-Assad left.

The reason for this solemn view of Idlib’s liberation was the fact that Jaish al-Fatah contains brigades affiliated with Jabhat an-Nusra (JaN), al-Qa’ida’s franchise in Syria. Was it right to be concerned that this group was involved in the liberation of Idlib? Absolutely. But if the Western media were to be believed you would think this event was akin to the fall of Mosul to Daesh in 2014 (I would say the fall of Raqqa to Daesh, but that was largely ignored). Almost every article or report in the Western media characterised Jaish al-Fatah as ‘al-Qa’ida-led rebels’ or ‘rebels affiliated with al-Qa’ida’.

As the Assad regime and its allies fled Idlib on the ground, the warplanes were sent in, terrorising civilians in rebel-held areas with barrel bombs and missiles while smearing the populace as al-Qa’ida. While the focus should have been on the Assad’s terrorism in the liberated areas (the main cause of the refugee problem), there was instead loud propaganda reducing the revolution to ‘al-Qa’ida’, Islam and Islamism and the repercussions for the West.

The fact that Jabhat an-Nusra played a role in the liberation of Idlib is not something that sits well with many Syrians supporting the revolutionary war, but it was a necessity. To contrast the reality of the inclusion of Jabhat an-Nusra in Jaish al-Fatah with the Western media’s al-Qa’ida obsession and the Assad regime’s propaganda narrative that this is a simple fight between his secular regime and Western-funded al-Qa’ida Islamists, look at the other major joint operation rooms fighting Assad: Fatah Halab was set up by revolutionary groups that did not want to participate in joint operations with Jabhat an-Nusra, while in the South, the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army—the main rebel force currently engaged in the ‘Southern Storm’ offensive to liberate Daraa City—has categorically rejected the idea of fighting with Jabhat an-Nusra, even to its own detriment, its offensive on the Daraa-Damascus highway was stalled by its refusal to cooperate with Jabhat an-Nusra.

20. thenational.ae/world/middle-east/syrias-southern-rebels-draw-up-new-game-plan?page1
There are good reasons for this wariness of Jabhat an-Nusra. While Jabhat an-Nusra is not the same as Daesh in terms of its goals and methods, and while it (unlike Daesh) contains a majority of Syrians radicalised by Assad’s violence, as opposed to foreign jihadists (though contains a significant number of those too), its ideology is ultimately counterrevolutionary. It isn’t fighting for a pluralistic or non-sectarian Syria shaped by the will of the Syrian people, but rather a Syria dominated by its own brand of sectarian, authoritarian Salafism. As with all other al-Qa’ida affiliates in the world, these principles are ultimately immovable, but it has shown itself to be a more pragmatic operator than Daesh, mainly because it has to balance self-interested piety at the top with the fact that most of its cadre are local Syrians who want to overthrow Assad, and see that as the group’s primary aim.

Briefly it should be noted that the gulf between Jabhat an-Nusra and Daesh in terms of method has its roots in the differences between the al-Qa’ida leadership and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of ‘al-Qa’ida in Iraq’, which was the predecessor organisation of Daesh. Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were opposed to Zarqawi’s insistence on ‘purifying’ Iraq of those deemed to be ‘kuffar’ or ‘rafidah’ (i.e. Shia, Yazidis etc.) as opposed to focusing solely on attacking the US-UK invasion forces and the forces of the occupation government. They had no moral qualms about Zarqawi’s sectarian mass murder, but instead were concerned that it would turn the local population and resistance groups against them. Ultimately their apprehension was proven correct when the local resistance groups formed the Harakat al-Sahwa²² (‘Awakening Movement’) to tackle the insurgent jihadists.

So, while the al-Qa’ida leadership’s pragmatism might prevail within Jabhat an-Nusra, it is still steeped in the theocratic supremacism that is a fundamental part of Wahhabism. Indeed, one particularly grave incident in Idlib illustrates the problems with Jabhat an-Nusra. In June 2015 in the village of Qalb Lawzah in the Idlib governorate, held by Jaish al-Fatah, a brigade affiliated to Jabhat an-Nusra, led by a Tunisian commander, attempted to confiscate the house of a Druze resident who they accused

²². internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/international/war-and-imperialism/483-iraq-response
of working with the Assad regime. After the resident rightfully refused to give up his property, the Jabhat an-Nusra commander then accused the man of blasphemy and attempted to take it by force, provoking a firefight. In the resulting skirmish twenty Druze were massacred. Ahrar ash-Sham, the dominant faction within Jaish al-Fatah, immediately intervened to stop it from escalating.

While supporters of Assad seized upon this, the response of the overwhelming majority of rebel factions was unanimous opposition to the actions of Jabhat an-Nusra. The Southern Front of the FSA immediately condemned what they called a “crime against our people... and Syrian diversity”, and announced their “readiness to protect Druze villages in Idlib as a step to defend Syrian diversity”.

Ahrar ash-Sham and several other Islamist groups issued a statement denouncing the massacre. In it they praised the Druze in Idlib for “supporting the revolution”, calling for the Jabhat an-Nusra perpetrators to be independently tried for their crimes, stating very clearly that the killing was a “contravention of Islam” and that “spilling the blood of the members of any sect” was “unjust”. Furthermore, they promised to work with all sects in “liberated areas” to prevent these kinds of incidents and that the revolution is a “people’s revolution” and “arms are only to be taken up against the regime, its allies and Daesh”. Even the leadership of Jabhat an-Nusra distanced itself from the actions of the brigade in question and stated that “the perpetrators would be ‘held to account for blood proven to be spilt’.”

When people think of ‘imperialism’ they often focus on its capacity as an offensive, active destructive force such as the US-UK invasion and occupation of Iraq. But they rarely comprehend its other capacity—as a cruel, indifferent force prioritising its interests in the face of appalling human suffering, even when it knows that it could have some positive effect. This is not an appeal for ‘humanitarian intervention’, which is a term that implies the use of ‘humanitarianism’ as a mere cover for the

24. csmonitor.com/world/middle-east/2015/0615/syrian-druze-massacre-can-jihadists-salvage-their-image
ruthless pursuance of imperialist interests, but rather the final proof that it doesn’t exist.

Again, if we consider Libya, it’s clear that the NFZ quite concretely stopped the Gaddafi regime using its airforce to bomb civilians in Benghazi and elsewhere. If the Gaddafi regime had been able to use its airforce to give it the upper hand or at least enforce a brutal stalemate in the civil war (like Syria), then a NFZ in Libya, would have created a humanitarian crisis on a similar scale to Syria. Does this mean that imperialism is good and that we should all bow to the world order of white men and their large weapons? Absolutely not, but what it does mean is that in certain circumstances, when the interests of imperialist forces converges with the will of progressive forces, then it can have positive political and humanitarian consequences. For today’s breed of ‘anti-imperialists’, faced with these confusing circumstances, they more often than not retreat into overt or tacit support for reaction and counterrevolution.

So what’s the difference between Libya and Syria? Why did imperialism intervene on behalf of the Libyan rebels but not the Syrian rebels? There is a very simple answer: imperialism simply didn’t have any immediate interests that necessitated taking action. Action could have been taken when the Assad regime began to bomb civilians with his airforce, action that would have almost certainly saved the lives, homes, limbs and minds of millions of people, action that would have almost certainly stopped Daesh’s rapid rise. But they chose not to. There was no material interests in Syria prompting a Libyan-style response, no vast oil reserves and major economic relationships that needed salvaging. On the other hand, contrast the immediate and massive response of imperialism when Daesh began to threaten the territorial legitimacy of the Iraq regime, capturing the Mosul dam and threatening to push into the oil-rich areas of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The point is that this indifference, this passive aspect of imperialism, in its lack of action, has been as destructive as its ‘active’ capacity. The confusion is one between internationalism and isolationism—there is absolutely nothing progressive or radical about accepting narratives that simply serve to justify dogmatic applications of ‘imperialism’ or ‘anti-imperialism’, especially when such narratives delegitimise and side against existing revolutionary forces.
If the US had enforced a NFZ and adequately armed the Free Syrian Army so it could overthrow the Assad regime, in what sense would that have been a negative development? There is no case against it. But that isn't how imperialism works. Imperialism does what's best for itself—it gives nothing away for free or out of the goodness of its heart. It has no heart, as Syrians who dared to believe in weapons shipments that never came and 'red lines' that turned out to be red herrings will tell you with great bitterness.

When 'anti-imperialists' subordinate the real struggle in Syria to their abstract opposition to imperialism, they, rather mind-bendingly, end up converging with imperialism, while tacitly or actively accepting other imperialist and regional hegemonic actors running riot.

The reason that Jaish al-Fatah contains a force like Jabhat an-Nusra can be found in this imperialistic indifference. It's not because of too much 'imperialist interference' that Jabhat an-Nusra is a force to be reckoned with, but rather because of the failure of forces to aid the rebels when they most required it. A force like, Jabhat an-Nusra, rooted, like Daesh, in al-Qa'ida in Iraq, had fairly large weapons stockpiles and already existing funding channels. Also unlike the FSA's leaders, Jabhat an-Nusra was not relying on aid that was never going to materialise or aid from forces prone to inciting devastating factionalism or able to capitalise when the FSA, absorbing a large amount of manpower, simply couldn't cope or was forced into stretching itself over two fronts against Assad and Daesh. The same problem confronted the Islamic Front, who joined the FSA in their offensive against Daesh in January 2014 and found themselves exposed fighting a war on two fronts.

So, in Idlib, where the forces contained within Jaish al-Fatah find themselves up against the Assad regime, Hezbollah and Iranian forces, as well as Daesh, it would have been suicidal to open up another front with Jabhat an-Nusra. It would have been a major victory for Assad if they had done so. Moreover, given Jabhat an-Nusra is massively outnumbered by other rebel factions across Syria, and since it is very much a junior partner in Idlib, the rebels judged Jabhat an-Nusra would be contained as part of the coalition, working with rebel groups who oppose its fundamental ideology. In fairness, this has mostly proven to be correct. Notwithstanding the incident in Qalb Lawzah, local Druze
fighters from surrounding villages fought alongside Jaish al-Fatah, specifically the Sham Legion, in the liberation of Idlib City.\textsuperscript{25}

Moreover, while Jabhat an-Nusra undoubtably want to impose their own brutal ultra-conservative form of sharia on Syria, Idlib included, their status as simply one component of Jaish al-Fatah meant that they did not have the capacity to do this. Jaish al-Fatah, from the outset, said it would not impose itself on the running of the city and would allow civil forces to work without interference or coercion. Thus far, this arrangement seems to have held firm, with some complications, but instead of ‘sharia courts’ running Idlib, civil councils have been established to run the city.\textsuperscript{26}

The hysteria-mongers and propagandists who, without even attempting to comprehend the balance of forces, predicted that Idlib would become the centre of some kind of Jabhat an-Nusra ‘emirate’, similar to Raqqa as the alleged capital of Daesh’s ‘caliphate’, turned out to be laughably wrong, but then it was never a matter of facts. It never is where propaganda and dogma are concerned.

There is no doubt that Jabhat an-Nusra is a constant threat to the rebels and to the revolution. While pragmatism may reign for now in places like Idlib, it will only be a matter of time before Jabhat an-Nusra seeks to assert itself. This is a reality of the struggle in Syria, one of its contradictions—it is not a reason to discard the struggle or to cave in to the fascistic pro-Assad narratives that would have us believe that all who raise arms against it are al-Qaeda. Indeed, even some of the Syrian revolution’s ostensible leftist supporters abroad often have a two-dimensional and vapid view of the role of Islamism within the revolution. This does not only apply to Syria either—it was precisely these hackneyed views (dogmatic navel gazing and self-justification rather than an attempt to engage with reality), that led much of the left to support the counterrevolution in Egypt.

Islamism has a social base in Syria, and when Assad is gone Islamism will play some role. But the fact is that the vast majority of the Islamist forces, certainly the largest ones, all concede that a post-Assad Syria should be shaped by the will of the Syrian people not by any one faction. This has been the trend with Is-

\textsuperscript{25} twitter.com/markito0171/status/582208804676362240
\textsuperscript{26} bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32540436
Syria and anti-anti-Imperialism

Islamism in the region so far, especially with the Islamism endorsed by many Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) affiliated groups. While it is conservative and rooted in politics that I fundamentally oppose, the course of Islamism over the past couple of decades has been one of relative moderation. With the AKP in Turkey, a party that is rooted in Islamism but is not itself Islamist, you have the blueprint for Islamism working within democracy.

The result is a form of conservative Islamic democracy similar to European Christian Democracy. The Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, attempted to follow this model of Islamic democracy, which is precisely why it was overthrown by anti-democratic, counter-revolutionary forces. The same can be seen with Ennahda in Tunisia.

The fundamental point is not that we skate over the parts of the politics of ostensibly Islamist or Islamist-rooted forces that we disagree with, but to recognise that in liberation struggles against secular tyrannies, Islamism is a major expression of the opposition to this, whether we like it or not, with a popular base rooted in the same demands for liberty that shape these revolutions themselves. This is as true in Syria and Egypt as it is in Palestine.

One of the great ironies of the left’s reaction to the Syrian revolution is the contrast in the way it relates to the Palestinian struggle. While the fact that the only active resistance groups to Israel are all Islamist, with the largest, Hamas, being Ikhwani Islamists, committed initially to Islamic democracy but forced to suspend democracy after being attacked by Fatah, backed by Israel, the US and the UK. Then you have the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, originally set up as the Palestinian branch of the Salafist Egyptian Islamic Jihad, but now much more akin to Hamas in terms of ideology—Islamism intertwined with Palestinian nationalism.

Bearing this in mind it has been hilarious to see those who would chant ‘We Are All Hamas’ suddenly sound like Binyamin Netanyahu when speaking of Syria. As bad as the Ba’athist tyranny is, they say, at least it’s ‘secular’, an argument that could be used to justify Israel’s continued subjugation of Palestine—an argument rooted in a similar logic to Israel’s ‘pinkwashing’ of its crimes against the Palestinians, advertising the fact the IDF has
thousands of female soldiers, in contrast to the regressive, paternalistic Islamist savagery of Hamas.

This argument applied to Syria is even more absurd given that in every area of Free Syria, despite the cruel inescapable reach of the regime due to its continued airpower, freedom of expression and general liberty is a reality that would have been unthinkable in Ba’athist Syria, where even the slightest criticisms were treated with brute force.

The viciously Islamophobic, racist and imperialistic inferences are exactly the same: they cannot have freedom because they are Muslims and we all know what giving them freedom means. I have even encountered pro-Assad leftists, those who drape themselves in the Palestinian flag, make the argument that the rebels use human shields and hide in civilian areas; thus you can’t blame Bashar for barrel bombs, for the hundreds of civilians killed per month, for the vast ethnic cleansing and the refugee crisis. Blame the rebels. Blame the victims. Netanyahu must laugh heartily when he hears the opponents of the Israeli occupation reproduce his own arguments in a context where the human suffering is currently even more intense. “See how they single out Israel but support Assad”, Netanyahu must say, rubbing his hands gleefully. He has a point.

Unsurprisingly, since Daesh’s rise two figures have attempted to claim they are Hamas clones: Binyamin Netanyahu and Bashar al-Assad—everybody knows why the former does it, but the latter does it because Hamas refused pressure from its former sponsor Iran to support Assad and came out in support of the Syrian revolution. This is something that those leftists who fundamentally support Assad won’t ever understand—they are de-legitimising everything that they claim to hold dear.

For example take Jacobin magazine. This hip, leftist US magazine has covered Syria not by approaching the relative abundance of left-leaning authors who have followed the revolution since day one and are capable of assessing it in balanced and realistic terms. Instead, the magazine has featured articles that epitomise the pro-Assad narrative on the left—ranging from a piece by

27. nytimes.com/2015/07/16/world/middleeast/a-syrian-parody-features-the-civil-war-and-is-stalked-by-it.html
the Israel-obsessed, Assad-supporting Asa Winstanley concerning some genuinely deranged and dangerous conspiracy theory about how Israel, the old Elders of Zion, secretly support al-Qa’ida in Syria, by which the author does not just mean Jabhat an-Nusra, but rather, like Assad, every rebel force in the country (this conspiracy theory has been excellently refuted by Michael Karadjis\(^\text{29}\)), to a mammoth editorial that essentially claims there is no revolution in Syria, the rebels are Daesh or al-Qa’ida, and thus Assad is the only option. These people don’t do irony.

These could easily be *Weekly Standard, Frontpage* or *Tablet* articles accusing Hamas of having links with or being Daesh or al-Qa’ida. Just swap the players around and you have the same essential racist, reactionary logic—the justification of collective punishment and mass murder by tyrants and oppressors. It is support for the oppressor over the oppressed but in a necessarily byzantine and squalidly visceral manner, exploiting, as all pro-Assad voices have done since the revolution began, the ignorance and latent prejudices of readers to rationalise absurdities to bolster support for Bashar al-Assad come what may, from the vicious destruction of barrel bombs to the death haze of sarin gas.

The fact that much of the left, (including those who are not explicit supporters of the Assad regime), don’t even understand the dynamics of this speaks volumes about the nature of the left as a vehicle not for challenging the dominant ideologies and radically transforming society, but simply for transmitting the very same logics and ideologies of reaction. The core logics remain unchallenged and often reproduced more sedulously than you would find on the right.

Indeed, this distorted logic is not just confined to the fringes, but even the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, a man who has identified himself as a friend of the Palestinian cause over the years, has consistently perpetuated this dismal logic over Syria. In an article for the *StWC*\(^\text{30}\)—an organisation that is the epitome of the anti-imperialism of fools and knaves\(^\text{31}\) (and of

\(^{29}\text{mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2015/06/29/%e2%80%8bthe.israel-backs-jabhat-al_nusra-fairy-tale-and-its-consequences/}\)

\(^{30}\text{stopwar.org.uk/news/how-do-we-stop-endless-war-waged-across-the-world-by-us-and-its-allies}\)

\(^{31}\text{blogs.spectaor.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/11/mother-agnes-has-pulled-out-of-the-stop-the-war-conference-and-yet-ah-e-would-have-fitted-in-so-well/}\)
which Corbyn was the ‘national chair’)—Corbyn, when discussing the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria unfathomably fails to mention the fact that this catastrophe is caused by the Assad regime’s war. Instead, following the US and British governments, he opts for the Daesh-centred view of everything, but goes even further in terms of attributing blame for the crisis.

Corbyn accuses what he calls the “Western backed” Free Syrian Army of “trying to attack the [Assad] regime”. Just think of that for a moment. Imagine we were discussing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza following Israel’s most recent massacre. Imagine if we were to describe the circumstances as the Iranian-backed Hamas (which they are not anymore, as it happens\(^{32}\)) trying to attack Israel? He would be rightly denounced and possibly disowned by the left, as many have done with Bernie Sanders, Corbyn’s US counterpart as the great left hope, who is a firm and vocal supporter of the Israeli government.

We all know what the function of ‘Iranian-backed’ is when it’s used by Israel apologists about Hamas. It’s usually meant to abrogate the fact that Hamas is a resistance movement against Israeli oppression and foster the idea that it is instead a pawn of the Iranian regime, which, according to Israeli propaganda, wants to ‘wipe Israel off the map’. This is part of a propaganda narrative that serves to justify the collective punishment of Palestinians. In the context of the Syrian revolutionary war, ‘Western backed’ fulfils the same function, justifying or at least neutralising Assad’s war by conjuring the idea that the Syrian rebels are mere proxies of the West waging an existential war against the embattled Assad regime.

These narratives are not propagated out of wickedness but are due to the same mechanism by which all ideology is absorbed and reproduced. To paraphrase Gramsci, this ideology is on the level of ‘common sense’. Among the left, the ideology of ‘common sense’ as it relates to Syria, is precisely what Corbyn reproduces above. The rebels are ‘Western backed’ without any nuance as to what this means, but with quite obviously negative connotations. Moreover, instead of being a revolutionary movement forced to take up arms after the Assad regime reacted to peaceful protests with military violence, Corbyn casually refers to them as ‘attack-

---

32. europe.newsweek.com/iran-ceases-financial-aid-hamas-gaza-official-claims-330889
ing’ the Assad regime—they are the antagonists. In the case of the Israeli government’s supporters, the ideology of ‘common sense’ would have it that Hamas are the antagonists who attack Israel by firing rockets into Israeli civilian areas.

This ‘common sense’ ideology obscures far more than it explains and is often, at root, simply propaganda of a higher quality, which is precisely why it must be challenged even more vociferously and with some nuance than the more obvious forms of propaganda. It’s about challenging entire modes of thought and worldviews that are layered with different social, cultural and overtly political motivations and rooted firmly in history. It can sound and feel like an impossible task, but, it is an essential undertaking of any force that considers itself to be genuinely radical.

Those of us who have attempted to follow and support the Syrian revolution are often accused by the forces of conservatism within the left of having somehow rescinded our leftist values. The opposite is true. While this certainly isn’t about ‘leftist purism’, it is about holding to the broad though essential principles of leftism and using them to navigate through changing realities of the world around us. This is the only radical alternative to conservatism. It ought to be a touchstone for any leftist—the Syrian democratic revolution certainly did become a civil war, but it is also a revolutionary war.

One side, despite their undeniable contradictions, are fighting to overthrow forces that want Syria to remain as a sectarian tyranny, bereft of basic human and civil rights, bereft of the very chance of, and the necessary conditions for, development and struggle. One side, despite the fact that some of the forces contained within the revolutionary movement occasionally reflect the same kind of reactionary contradictions as the Assad regime (which might be expected given they were birthed in its shadow), are fighting to smash an entity that embodies the static, brutal, ultra-conservative order of the region.

While living in London in the 1860s Karl Marx was often derided by some of his socialist peers for his perceived obsession with the American Civil War, which he followed religiously, deeming it to be a revolutionary war in the purest sense. Marx of course never argued that the war was in any sense a revolutionary socialist war, but for him, one side, namely the Unionists, were fighting against forces of pure conservatism—forces that
wanted to preserve the system of chattel slavery and the power of the slave-owning class. Despite all the contradictions on the Unionist side, Marx determined them to be revolutionary because their social and political program was about enforcing progress by sweeping away reaction and conservatism.

Even if a Unionist victory led to complications contrary to Marx’s initial simplistic view, the Unionist forces were fundamentally fighting for conditions in which further struggle would be possible in the future. The demand for an end to one system of exploitation, slavery and the emancipation of the slaves in the South meant creating the basis and space for these forces (and other progressive social forces) to develop and assert themselves. No instant utopia or sudden eruption of progress, but the necessary movement of social forces.

In Syria, the dynamic is similar. The revolutionaries by their very essence are fighting for the end of one system and the institution of a new arena of struggle and development, while the Assad regime and its allies wish for it all to remain as it is and has been, with power for the sake of power and the smashing of any forces that challenge such power as their raison d’être. They are fighting not simply to smash the active forces that struggle but to smash the very idea of struggle. These dynamics apply more broadly to the Arab spring, and it is absolutely no surprise that those who so strongly oppose the great movements of progress are drawn from the traditional right and those of the traditional left.

The continuity is pure conservatism. When we observe the reaction of much of the left and the right to the Syrian revolution and different theatres of conflict in the Arab spring, we see an almost organic convergence in terms of the style and essence of the arguments. It is this that determines this ideological ‘common sense’ that the left perpetuates.

In fact, ironically—given the extent to which Assad’s entire propaganda directly employs the ‘war on terror’ narrative, and the extent to which this narrative has been boosted, confirmed and fully accepted in the West by the rise of Daesh—the left’s ‘common sense’ ideology on Syria is almost identical to the right’s. For example some on the right have advocated the West
supporting Assad and Iran— and whatever the surface differences, the logic is interchangeable with some of the left’s (including Jeremy Corbyn, as it happens, who revealed in LBC interview that his main problem with the UK-US coalition was that it did not formally contain Iran).

There are no protests about the fact that US warplanes literally share the same airspace as Assad’s airforce as it barrel bombs civilians. There are no protests at the fact that the US began a laughable policy of training 60 Syrian rebels to fight solely against Daesh and completely ignore the Assad regime’s much more destructive violence against their country (a requirement that prompted many of the fighters to withdraw from the programme), violence that is ultimately at the root of Daesh.

There are no protests from these ‘anti-imperialists’ against actual imperialist machinations. The left, while weaving its delusional, self-justifying pseudo-anti-imperialism, actually ends up disregarding and exculpating the machinations of imperialism in Syria. The US went from a position of rhetorically supporting Assad’s removal to a policy of rapprochement with Assad’s biggest backer, now arguing that the criminal Iranian regime, the main sponsor of Assad’s terror, “should be part of the conversation”.

This has always been perfectly congruent with US policy towards Syria. While many believe that much of its ‘one foot in, one foot out’ stance towards the Syrian opposition was part of a strategy related to its negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme, it is also perfectly true that the US has never wanted or tried to overthrow the regime, opting instead, in the words of the then US defence secretary Leon Panetta in 2012, to work towards maintaining as much of the regime as possible, to allow for a ‘stable’ transition. As with the US’s stance toward all of the Arab revolutions, the emphasis is on stability, management and safe transitions, such as with Egypt and Yemen, not any commitment to ‘regime change’.

This has not been some harmless myth, but an active part of Assad’s propaganda—relying on this hollow, conspiratorial ‘anti-

33. telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11478795/the-west-now-has-no-choice-but-to-work-with-assad
34. theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/syrian-fighters-us-training-isis-ashton-carter-senate-hearing
35. politoco.com/story/2015/07/barack-obama-mideast-peace-iran-deal-syria-isis-120654.html
imperialist’ narrative of the US’s will for ‘regime change’, or its desire to ‘attack Iran’, to justify and whitewash his crimes. As things have slipped further beyond the US’s control, with the rise of Daesh, and the refusal of the Syrian rebels to be crushed and sue for peace, the US has moved ever closer to a position of tacit support for Assad. This is a reality that much of the so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ left rarely ever recognise because it does not conform to their predetermined models of the global order, and because they too, echoing Assad, have to keep up the propaganda narrative.

Indeed, given the fact that US and UK are now bombing Iraq and Syria on behalf of the sectarian Iraqi regime and its fascistic militias, an innocent anti-imperialist might have wondered why the Stop the War Coalition and other leftist anti-war forces did not mobilise in the way they did following the Assad regime’s gassing to death of more than a thousand civilians in East Ghouta? The answer is that they never mobilised primarily because the dominant forces within the StWC largely support Assad, and this position is bolstered by the opportunism of some of the other political forces within it.

It is deeply ironic that some of the so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ left should denounce the Syrian rebels and opposition for requesting Western aid against Assad/Iran/Russia, yet the same people actively support the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party. The YPG, which is not in any way hostile to the Assad regime, has in its war against Daesh received more aid from the US than the Syrian rebels have received in four years of war against the much more brutally efficient Assad regime, including coordinated air-strikes. This duplicity and incoherence is not accidental.

I’ve often said that Syria is the left’s Israel, as it proves that the left would support events every bit as brutal and regressive as Israel’s subjugation of Palestine if by some irrational switch it was deemed necessary by them to do so. For many, what matters is not Palestinian freedom or the freedom of Syrians or any other oppressed people, but simply some relation to politics that exchanges principle for the politics of fetish and factionalism. The left, in its relation to the ruling classes, in its activities often resembles that of a rebellious teen to its parents—contrary to the extreme, but ultimately sharing much in common.
Sadly Syria proves that for the ‘soul’ of the left, the dismal though dominant counterrevolutionary dynamics of Stalinism and its continued festering existence within the leftist milieu, even within self-proclaimed anti-Stalinist forces, reigns supreme—where internationalism is degraded to obsessive concern with real and imagined geopolitical machinations. Where solidarity with the oppressed is conditional on party lines, peer pressure and a tacit dichotomy between worthy and unworthy victims. Syria confirms Marx’s famous statement that the ideology of the ruling classes is at all times the ruling ideology and finds an ironic, disheartening and ultimate validation in the chorus echoes of many leftists.
The beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010-2011 will be remembered as one the defining events of the early part of the century. Simultaneous protest movements developed across the entire Arab world calling for freedom, democracy and social justice, blossoming into full blown revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria. The toppling of not one but several decades-old dictatorships through the active movement of tens of millions of people gave hope to so many who struggle for freedom around the world.

The Arab Spring threw the established order in the Middle East into flux. It greatly unsettled the US, Russia and Israel as their preferred dictators were toppled or put under pressure by popular protest. It gave hope to millions who saw a real possibility of the end of tyrannical rule across the Arab world. But it also disorientated the anti-war movement, built in an earlier period where US/UK aggression, not popular revolution, was the main factor driving events.

The main organisations and activists responsible for mobilising millions in opposition to war and in solidarity with those in the Middle East affected by imperialism, remained passive throughout these momentous events.
Western Intervention

While the leadership of Stop the War Coalition (StWC) was initially supportive of the Arab revolts when they toppled US-backed dictators like Ben Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt, when the revolts spread to the regimes of Qaddafi and Assad—Cold War era opponents of the West—their support began to cool.

A layer of activists in the movement saw these countries as opposed to imperialism, so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ regimes that were part of an ‘axis of resistance’ which merited support regardless of their brutality. This was despite the fact that all dictatorships in the region were dealing with US/EU imperialism; Assad’s regime tortured prisoners for the CIA during the Bush Presidency, while Qaddafi’s regime, in partnership with the EU, built detention camps in Libya to detain migrants and prevent them crossing the Mediterranean to Europe.

The revolt initially threw the plans of the Western imperialist powers into disarray. The US was still praising Mubarak while millions marched in the streets calling for his downfall. The French government was split over how to deal with Ben Ali, while then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton green lighted vicious repression in Bahrain to put down the uprising. Eventually the Western powers rallied and tried to ride the revolutionary wave, taking advantage of the turmoil created by the revolts. The first target for intervention was Libya. StWC called protests against Western intervention, marching alongside pro-regime figures who were supporting crackdowns on protesters. These protests proved ineffectual and the US, UK and France bombed Libya, disabling Qaddafi’s air force and provided arms to the rebels. Libya’s revolutionaries held out against Qaddafi’s armed forces in Misrata and Benghazi, organised an uprising in the capital and took control by the end of August 2011. Qaddafi was captured and executed in October 2011.

In reaction to this, the Russian and Iranian governments stepped up financing and arming the Syrian regime to ensure it did not suffer a similar fate. Western governments paid lip service to the cause of the Syrian revolutionaries and armed rebels, but worried by the prospect of a democratic state in Syria challenging their interests in the region, they did not extend them anything like the support they gave the Libyan revolutionaries.
The Syrian revolt against the Assad regime is now in its fifth year. The death toll from the conflict has surpassed 330,000, with over two million wounded. 215,000 are still detained in regime prisons, 200,000 are missing, and between 650,000 and 1,000,000 people are under starvation siege by the regime in rebel towns and cities. Bombings of civilian areas by the regime are a daily occurrence, 4.5 million Syrians are refugees overseas, and eight million—almost half the remaining population—are internally displaced.

In all this time there was no direct Western intervention in Syria against Assad. No bombs were dropped on Syria by Western powers until mid-2014, the fourth year of the revolution, and these were targeted at ISIS, not the regime. Not a single bomb has been dropped on regime military installations by the Coalition air force.

All the hype and warnings notwithstanding, Western aid to the rebels has been very limited. By mid-2013 the Free Syrian Army had received only $12 million of a promised $60 million of aid from the US, and been denied access to weaponry by the EU. The support they did receive from the West was only non-lethal aid consisting of food, medicine and vehicles. From 2012 onwards, the CIA was involved in monitoring weapons shipments to Syria from Saudi, Qatar and Turkey. Its role—publicly admitted by American officials—was to stop the rebels receiving the anti-air missiles and heavy weaponry that could have neutralised Assad’s military advantage and hastened the downfall of the regime.

When the US did finally begin to arm and train rebels in 2014, it was tightly controlled to a ridiculous extent. A Wall Street Journal article described how “Some weapons shipments were so small that commanders had to ration ammunition. One of the US’s fa-

3. reuters.com/article/2013/02/28/us-syria-crisis-us-idUSBRE91R0KM20130228
vourite trusted commanders got the equivalent of 16 bullets a month per fighter. Rebel leaders were told they had to hand over old anti-tank missile launchers to get new ones—and couldn’t get shells for captured tanks. When they appealed last summer [2014] for ammo to battle fighters linked to al-Qa’ida, the US said no”.

Rebels themselves were clear on this from the start, as detailed by the New York Times back in March 2013: “The outside countries give us weapons and bullets little by little,” said Abdel Rahman Ayachi, a commander in Soquor al-Sham, an Islamist group in Northern Syria. He made a gesture as if switching on and off a tap. “They open and they close the way to the bullets like water,” “Arming or not arming, lethal or nonlethal—it all depends on what America says,” said Mohammed Abu Ahmed, who leads a band of anti-Assad fighters in Idlib Province.

In contrast the regime has $3.5 billion worth of contracts for arms from Russia, and loans to pay for it. With Syria’s domestic weapons industry too small to produce enough arms to sustain a protracted conflict, the imperialist intervention which has kept the conflict going and maintains it to this day is from Russia. Yet StWC only comments about one set of interventions in Syria—those of the West.

Selecte anti-Imperialism

The revolutions exposed that for many in the anti-war movement, opposition to imperialist intervention only extended to opposition to imperialist intervention by the UK, US, EU, and their allies. There was no opposition to the imperialist actions of the Russian government, or the crucial support given by the Iranian government to the Assad regime.

This was defended by StWC Officer John Rees on the grounds that ‘the main enemy is at home’, and that US imperial power was still the main determining factor in the Middle East.

6. wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582
8. interpretermag.com/russia-syrias-banker-and-arms-supplier/
As a British based organisation StWC’s role was only to oppose the imperialist actions of the British government.\(^9\)

Too many leading figures in the British anti-war movement chose to view all these revolutions through their relation to the US/UK and its intentions. When the dictatorship was backed primarily by Russia, and Western influence is minimal, this makes little sense.

The core group of activists and writers that developed and supported this position on Syria were spelled out by John Rees as “the Marxist writer and activist Tariq Ali, Guardian columnist Seumas Milne, MP George Galloway, Iraqi exiles and analysts Sami Ramadani and Sabah Jawad, the Deputy President of the Stop the War Coalition Andrew Murray, the convenor of Stop the War Lindsey German, and supporters of Counterfire”.\(^10\) As is obvious from this list, Syrian and pro-revolution Arab voices have been marginalised, while outright apologists for the Assad regime like George Galloway have been central to developing and propagating the position of StWC. The contributions of supporters of the revolution such as Syrian Marxist Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, Syrian human rights activist Razan Zaitouneh or Palestinian intellectual and former Knesset member Dr Azmi Bishara were ignored.

This approach erased the agency of the Syrian people fighting the regime, and ignored the role of imperialist powers like Russia in propping up the dictatorship. It served to obscure the complex reality of the multi-polar world system, split between competing imperialist powers, with no single dominant power overwhelmingly determining the course of events. Instead of analysing the relationships of regional and global powers thrown into flux by the Arab Spring, the approach of the anti-war movement was shaped by its a priori framework of Cold War power relations, massaged to fit domestic alliances developed during opposition to the ‘War on Terror’ and the Iraq War. While this stance may have been suitable for the period of the war on Iraq, where Britain was the aggressor and where there was no uprising against the dictatorship, in the context of the

---

Arab Spring and Syrian revolt it resulted in a complete failure to meet basic principles of solidarity with a revolutionary struggle. In practice it meant nothing was said or done by StWC about the arming and funding of the Assad regime by Russia and Iran, despite this being the main reason for the regime’s ability to inflict violence and its longevity. Little to nothing was said about the daily indiscriminate bombing of civilians, the countless sectarian massacres and brutal tactics of starvation sieges on rebel towns and cities. No attempt was made to listen to or to give a platform to those who had launched the revolt in the first place. According to John Rees this couldn’t be done as it would have made “what we say indistinguishable from the view of Hilary Clinton and William Hague”. Adding insult to injury, this is framed as siding with the opposition, who were supposedly ‘Western-backed’.

In the absence of any solidarity with the people of those countries struggling for freedom and democracy, the anti-war movement was paralysed. It was unwilling to criticise those governments responsible for carrying out the slaughter, and unable to give a platform to the oppressed. No action was taken on one of the most pressing events tearing apart the region, with serious ramifications for other causes.

The justification for opposing imperialist intervention is that it kills tens of thousands, makes the lives of millions more people a misery, and places the fate of people in the hands of the imperial war machines, not in the hands of the people themselves. Since the justification comes from a place of solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering of fellow human beings, those organisations professing solidarity must listen to what the oppressed are saying, give a platform to their wishes and demands and attempt to act on them.

Meanwhile, across Syria people held weekly Friday protests, asking for solidarity and support in their struggle. These hundreds of thousands of voices were ignored. Every week tens of thousands of Syrian activists voted in online polls to choose the main slogan for the Friday demonstrations. Some called for in-
tervention, some for weapons, many asked simply for help, and to
spread awareness of their struggle. Reading through the slogans
you can chart the disillusionment of the protestors as their calls
for solidarity went unanswered:

2011-07-29:  Your Silence is Killing Us
2011-09-09:  International Protection
2011-12-12:  The Buffer Zone is Our Demand
2012-03-02:  Providing Weapons for the Free Army
2012-03-16:  Immediate Military Intervention
2012-06-22:  Governments Let Us Down, Where are the People?
2012-08-10:  Arm Us with Anti-Aircraft Weapons
2012-10-05:  We Want Weapons, not Statements
2012-12-07:  No to Peacekeeping Forces in Syria
2013-02-01:  The International Community are Partners to Al-Assad
             in His Massacres
2013-08-23:  The Terrorist Bashar Kills Civilians with Chemical
             Weapons While the World Watches
2013-09-13:  The Murderer is Under the International Community’s
             Protection
2013-12-27:  Death Barrels with International License
2015-02-20:  The World Failed us, God Give Us Victory

British-Syrian Journalist Salwa Amor wrote in August 2013,
ahead of the anti-war demonstration against intervention in
Syria, “the upcoming protest and its slogans embody an essence of white
supremacy mentality; imposing their beliefs and demands on the Syrian
people’s revolution. ‘No Intervention’, ‘Hands off Syria’ are not slogans
that came from Syria, far from it, therefore one must assume that they
are slogans that are being imposed on the Syrian people”.

When the reality of the Syrian revolution did not fit with the
alliances that dominated the British anti-war movement, its de-
mands were simply ignored. A narrative was constructed where
the US and British governments’ desire to topple Assad was pre-
sented as the main threat to Syria, in the process rendering Syr-
ian revolutionaries guilty, ‘by association’, of a political crime.

15. 5pillarsuk.com/2013/08/29/stop-the-war-must-support-the-syrian-
     revolution/
The 2013 Vote: Obama’s Red Herring

A decisive turning point in the Syrian struggle came with the votes against intervention by the British Parliament and US Congress in August and September 2013. The votes were to decide whether to intervene militarily following the regime massacre of over 1400 people with sarin gas in the Damascus suburbs and Eastern Ghouta on the night of August 21st.

Use of chemical weapons by the regime was supposedly Obama’s ‘red line’, justifying intervention. In preparation for intervention, Cameron put the vote to Britain’s parliament and lost narrowly. Rather than intervene immediately, the Obama administration put the decision to a vote in Congress. This was also lost and no intervention took place.

Instead, on the recommendation of Russia (and as it was admitted later, Israel) a deal was done with the Assad regime for it to hand over its chemical weapons in exchange for no military strikes.

This decision was hailed as a great victory for the anti-war movement. StWC took credit for having stopped the bombing of Syria, claiming that strong anti-war sentiment was a decisive factor in persuading MPs to vote against intervention. This was only part of the truth. Just two years before when the anti-war movement was arguably stronger and more outspoken, those same MPs had voted to authorise military strikes on Libya. They had paid no heed to ‘anti-war sentiment’ when there was an opportunity to intervene and potentially seize valuable oil resources. The idea that imperialist States will halt or alter important geopolitical decisions like military intervention based merely on public opinion, is not credible. The British government invasion of Iraq shows that public opinion and popular demonstrations alone will not stop states carrying out military action. Much more disruption and pressure in the form of strikes and mass direct action are needed to accomplish that. Nothing of the sort was in evidence around the Syria vote.

The response of the French governments to the Ghouta sarin attack is rarely mentioned, but instructive. After the Ghouta

17. bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-15/israel-helped-obama-skirt-red-line-on-syria
massacre, French and American military planners had begun working on plans for co-ordinated strikes on regime military targets.\textsuperscript{18} Despite the UK parliament no vote, on 30 Aug the French government ordered their warplanes to prepare for military strikes on Syrian regime targets in expectation of an American attack. The warplanes were waiting, armed and fuelled and ready to attack, when Obama personally contacted President Hollande to inform him he would not launch the attack without Congress’ approval.\textsuperscript{19} The French government decided not to intervene without American support.

Making the overthrow of a government dependent on a vote is not the typical action of warmongering imperialist powers. Syrian activists on the ground were acutely aware of what this meant. Qusai Zakarya, spokesperson for Moadamiyah, one of the Damascus towns hit by the sarin attack reported: “I felt so disappointed,” [Qusai] says. “I learned enough to know that when an American president wants to make a military strike, he just do it without telling anyone. We’ve seen it in Iraq, we’ve seen it in Afghanistan, we’ve seen it in Somalia, we’ve seen it all over the world”. Syrian-American activists in the US complained that the Obama administration did nothing to prepare for the vote, that there was no campaigning by the government for a result in favour of intervention. Their opinion was the administration had wanted to lose, and it got the result it wanted.

Go forward two years, and it has been revealed that twenty British pilots have been flying sorties over Syria with the US air force. That the government was willing to have British pilots clandestinely bombing Syria shows their willingness to defy parliament when it’s expedient. Deep rooted imperial interests, and not just public opinion, have shaped military intervention, or its absence, in the region.

All this points to the reality that had the imperialist powers wanted to intervene militarily in Syria they had every means and plentiful opportunities to do so. They chose not to because in their estimation the most dangerous factor in Syria was not the Assad regime, but the popular revolution. Anything which would

\textsuperscript{18} medium.com/war-is-boring/french-bombers-were-loaded-up-syrian-rebels-were-deployed-all-awaiting-obamas-okay-to-attack-69247c24253f
\textsuperscript{19} theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/31/syrian-air-strikes-obama-congress
have hastened Assad’s demise and allowed the popular movement to take power was avoided, at great cost to the Syrian people.

This is the actual imperialist strategy over Syria—let the country bleed by depriving the popular revolt of the weapons and support it needs, hoping that exhaustion and the devastation caused by vicious state repression forces the rebellious population to accept a settlement that preserves the regimes’ state apparatus, so that a new dictator can be found to re-impose ‘stability’ on the country.

Obsessed with the minimal threat of Western intervention, the anti-war movement was blind to this, and to the fact this episode represented a great victory for the regime: it had escaped punishment for killing over 1400 people, and had received approval to continue killing more by conventional means. The regime did just that, launching an offensive that recaptured many rebel towns around Damascus and Aleppo’s countryside, while subjecting Aleppo to a daily barrel bombing campaign which killed over 2,500 people, displaced hundreds of thousands and turned the rebel held half of the city into a ghost town.20

Hypocritical anti-Imperialism

The anti-war movement has not even been consistent in its opposition to Western intervention. The only large scale activity StWC organised around Syria was the ‘Hands off Syria’ demonstration in August 2013. Having been inert for almost thirty months while the regime slaughtered protesters, suddenly there was a burst of activity aimed specifically at stopping any attack on the regime. The demonstrations themselves were full of regime supporters, bearing the regime flag and carrying pictures of Assad. In July 2014 Lindsey German wrote a defence of StWCs position making the case that opposing intervention didn’t mean you supported the governments that were the target.

To quote Salwa Amor again: “Holding placards that say ‘No intervention and hands off Syria’ appears to Syrians that you are on Russia’s side, and Russia is and has been intervening since the beginning (with its war vessels in Tartous since the fifth month of the revolt and most of the weapons that have killed Syrians were a gift to Assad from Putin)”.

20. sn4br.org/blog/2014/05/01/the-international-community-must-save-aleppo/
The anti-war movement cannot be an effective instrument against imperialism, unless it is in active solidarity with those suffering from it. To fail to provide solidarity, means its actions only help those governments which are threatened by Western intervention, not the people of those countries who suffer the most from it. Meanwhile, the movement has been largely silent and organised few public protests against the ongoing bombing of Syria by the US-led Coalition against ISIS. These bombings, ostensibly to aid the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) against ISIS, have also aided the regime. Bombs were dropped by the coalition in and around Deir Ezzour, where there are only regime and ISIS forces on the frontlines. The open collaboration this indicates between the regime and the Coalition has not warranted a mention by StWC.

Even when coalition bombings have killed civilians and targeted camps for internally displaced persons there have been no protests. On August 11\textsuperscript{th} 2015 the US-led Coalition bombed Atmeh refugee camp in Idlib province, targeting a weapons factory run by the Free Syrian Army aligned Jaysh Al-Sunna faction. The bombing killed 25 civilians including five girls from the same family. This is one of dozens of air strikes which targeted Syrian rebel groups over the previous year, while not a single regime military installation has been targeted in over a year of US-led Coalition attacks. None of these bombings have merited protests by StWC. Few, if any, have been mentioned in articles or statements on its website.

Another inconsistency is the different approach to Saudi Arabia and Iran by the mainstream anti-war movement. StWC has rightly criticised the bombing of Yemen by the Saudi Air Force. But this raises the question of why its leadership cannot criticise Iranian intervention in Syria. The Iranian government’s involvement in Syria is well documented, coming in the form of enormous financial aid through loans, oil and asset deals, and military aid with as many as 6,000 Iranian Revolution Guard Corp troops and military advisors in Syria. Alongside these troops, Iranian government funding and training aided the formation of the National Defence Force, a 150,000 strong loyalist militia. Iranian government funding also paid for thousands of Afghani mercenaries to bolster the regime’s numbers. Many of these Afghans are poor refugees and migrants in Iran who were
recruited with promises of citizenship and a regular salary, and sent directly to the frontlines.

The rationale appears to be geopolitical: Saudi Arabia is seen as an ally of the US and UK, while Iran is not. For those people suffering at the hands of Iranian intervention in Syria, the distinction means nothing. Moreover, alliances between imperial powers and client dictatorships change (and are currently changing). Meanwhile the mainstream British anti-war movement’s approach reeks of hypocrisy, and undermines the principles of opposition to imperial and colonial agendas that it ought to defend.

**Ramifications**

What was exposed by the Arab Spring—and the Syrian revolution in particular—was the negative impact of these self-limiting, isolationist 'anti-intervention' positions when faced with a millions-strong revolt demanding active solidarity. As the Syrian revolution rumbled on the anti-war movement remained inert. No solidarity protests were held. No campaigns were organised to challenge the narrative about the conflict. No fundraisers were organised for the hundreds, then thousands, then millions of refugees as the regime violence escalated. No statements were issued condemning the arming of a brutal dictatorship that was carrying out vicious attacks resulting in hundreds of deaths per day. No StWC resources were used to raise awareness about the worse-than-Gaza starvation sieges, about the horrendous torture and death of tens of thousands in regime prisons, about the daily barrel bombing of civilian areas. Even when British citizens like Dr Abbas Khan were tortured and killed by the regime for doing medical aid work, StWC said and did nothing.

Actions which would have caused huge protests if carried out by the US, UK, or Western-allied states like Israel, occurred without a whisper from most anti-war groups. For those who would argue that this isn't the purpose of groups like StWC, that it is a coalition of different organisations and this policy was what it could reach agreement on, this just highlights its shortcomings and the need to transform its approach.

This failing was not due to lack of initiatives to support and publicise. Amnesty International has long documented the non-violent civilian resistance to the Assad regime, from the December 2011 Dignity General Strike, the peaceful mass protests or-
organised by Local Coordination Committees, hunger strikes by prisoners, strikes by shopkeepers, student protests, formation of unions and thousands of other actions which Syrians have organised to challenge the regime. In Britain, the Syrian community was organising weekly protests in London, targeting the Syrian and Russian embassies, holding marches, lectures and meetings about the revolution to raise awareness about their struggle.

Inaction by the anti-war movement directly contributed to the absence of a strong solidarity movement in support of the revolution. It meant the mainstream anti-war and anti-imperialist narrative about Syria remains incredibly weak, making little mention of the regime’s violence, or the ongoing revolution. In practical terms the policy resulted in the abandonment of millions of people enduring horrendous conditions as a result of imperialism.

The lack of protest and in-depth coverage from StWC has allowed the ruling class and media to determine the narrative over Syria. The violence of Assad’s regime had been used to justify the need for intervention, until it became inconvenient to acknowledge that Western governments were pursuing a policy of allowing Syria to bleed to death. Then regime violence was simply ignored, disappearing off the front pages even as the violence worsened. When the years of violence, oppression and chaos lead to the rise of ISIS, focus was quickly shifted to an enemy whose ideology and gruesome executions fit more easily with the narrative of the ‘war on terror’. Assad’s violence now gets only an occasional mention, when in fact it is still the cause of the overwhelming majority of deaths in Syria.

The people of the Arab world gained from the knowledge that around the globe people are in solidarity with them against the actions of the West and of their own repressive governments. When atrocities as horrendous as anything that the US or Israel has done are inflicted on Syrians, what were they to think when these solidarity movements remained silent? Syrians were abandoned, and more radical and extreme voices in the opposition gained support as a result. Well before the rise of ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra, Syrian revolutionaries were warning of the consequences of the failure of solidarity.
The Tragedy of the Palestinians in Syria

Nowhere was the ‘selective internationalism’ of anti-war movement more bitterly exposed than in the case of the Palestinian refugees in Syria. Syria was home to around 500,000 Palestinian refugees. The largest refugee camp is in Damascus—Yarmouk camp—but there are many other camps around the country, in Daraa, Hama, Homs, Jaramana, Latakia, Khan Dannun, Ein Al-Tal and Neirab.

When the Syrian revolt began, Palestinian camp organisations adopted official positions of neutrality. While there was large support from Palestinian-Syrians for the revolution, elder generations knew of the tendency for Palestinians to endure great suffering when they were caught up in wars and revolutions. This policy was sabotaged not by the Syrian opposition, but by pro-regime Palestinian factions who from the start of the revolution harassed, arrested and tortured Palestinian and Syrian activists.

In June 2011 Pro-regime factions organised a march of Palestinians to the occupied Golan Heights on Naksa day. This was facilitated by the regime as a way of distracting attention from the ongoing crackdown on protests. When Palestinians reached the border they were fired upon by the Israeli Defence Force and fourteen were killed, with hundreds injured. When the protestors returned to the camp bearing their dead, a mass demonstration of as many as 100,000 people was held at the headquarters of the PFLP-GC, who had organised the protest but refused to attend themselves. Palestinians tried to storm the building and seize the PFLP-GC leader, Ahmed Jibril. Fourteen were shot dead by PFLP-GC gunmen and Jibril had to be rescued from the crowd by the Syrian Army. The next day, Yarmouk camp was bombed by the regime as punishment.

The camps became a battleground. Opposition factions entered Yarmouk to fight the regime, and the regime began subjecting the camps to the daily bombings it visited on all rebel civilian areas. The regime army made regular incursions into the camps, killing civilians and activists. A siege was imposed on Yarmouk, first loosely, but then tightened to restrict all food, water and electricity. The siege has been in effect for over 1000 days. The camp was barrel bombed repeatedly, while its population was prevented from leaving by pro-regime factions and the Syrian
Army. This brutal collective punishment engendered little or no protest from StWC or many Palestine solidarity organisations. In summer 2014 the difference in attitude towards Palestinians in Syria was thrown into stark relief when Israel launched yet another assault on Gaza. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets around the world to protest Israel’s murderous assault. Few of the solidarity organisations had mobilised when similar violence was committed by the Assad regime.

What was done to Gaza was no worse than the violence inflicted upon the Palestinians camps, and Syrian towns and cities for the previous three years. Yet shelling and dropping barrel bombs on Yarmouk camp brought little public criticism. Even when Palestinians were detained and subjected to months of systematic rape, starvation and torture, and died in regime jails, or were ‘disappeared’, solidarity organisations remained silent.

Over 100,000 Palestinians have now fled Syria, refugees for a second time over. This enormous exodus should be a central issue for anyone concerned with the plight of the Palestinian people, yet it garners little coverage. This has left Palestinian-Syrians feeling uniquely abandoned by the solidarity movements which use their name. Salim Salamah, head of the Palestinian League for Human Rights Syria stated “What I feel and most of the people who left and survived feel is complete disappointment and absolute sadness, and a feeling of betrayal... most importantly from the international community... There’s a serious crisis of morality and humanity about what’s going on in Syria, from north to south, not only in Yarmouk”. This has been reflected in the continuing protests by those who remain in Yarmouk and in the new refugee camps they have been forced into in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

The Islamophobic Narrative of the Revolution and its Impact

There is a further tragedy. One of the anti-war movement’s main successes during the opposition to the ‘war on terror’ was that it was built with and within the Muslim community, it defended them against racism, and provided an organised outlet for angry and alienated British Muslim youth who wanted to take action against the injustices they witnessed abroad and faced at home. This outlet has not existed over Syria. The mainstream anti-war
movement’s stance has alienated a large part of the Muslim community which is actively and heavily involved in supporting the Syrian revolution and the civilian population affected by the war. While the majority of people in Britain have only been shown the occasional glimpse of regime atrocities, there has been no filter between Muslim communities and the slaughter. Broadcast nightly on Al-Jazeera, circulated on YouTube, spoken about in mosque sermons—full exposure to the horrors has galvanised thousands to action. Many British Muslims piled their energy into community and mosque-led humanitarian relief work, aid collections and convoys. These efforts have been enormous, with millions of pounds collected annually and up to twelve aid convoys a year going to Syria from Britain with ambulances, food, medical supplies and clothes.

As the situation became more dire in Syria, and in the absence of a mass movement to pour their energies into, other British Muslims joined the armed struggle. The duty of Islamic solidarity towards Syrians was felt personally by many who couldn’t ignore the sectarian atrocities they witnessed daily via social media. Many initially joined Free Syrian Army or Islamic brigades. With the rise of Islamic State, its targeting of Muslims in the West with propaganda and its international jihadist ideology providing a justification for volunteers, many alienated Muslim youth turned to it: a phenomenon seen previously in Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘foreign jihadists’ became a global issue over Syria.

The anti-war movement, which should have provided a non-violent outlet for these young men and women was entirely absent. And the absence of most anti-war activists from solidarity campaigns with the Syrian revolution meant they couldn’t advance the single clearest argument about ISIS: that its rise was due to devastating and barbaric government repression of the popular revolution, and the isolation and abandonment of the Syrian people by the world’s governments.

In fact StWC has done just the opposite. In October 2014 Lindsey German and Robin Beste wrote an article for StWC called: ‘Ten reasons why bombing Iraq and Syria is no way to defeat ISIS’. The article manages to make no mention at all of the Assad’s regime’s violence, no mention of its relentless bombing of towns and cities which has killed tens of thousands and driven millions of Syrians to flee and become refugees, has crippled the opposition’s ability to govern and created the conditions of
desperate poverty, lawlessness and oppression in which ISIS has grown. This failure can also be seen in the way StWC has written about the Syrian refugee crisis, saying only that Syrian refugees are fleeing ‘civil war’, not mentioning Assad or his regime’s role in continuing the slaughter for five years.

This rhetoric has certainly fed into the racist discourse about what is happening in Syria. With no mention of the civil opposition, no condemnation of Assad, and the maligning of the rebels as Western-backed jihadists, StWC added its voice to the dominant narrative that Syria’s revolution had become merely a sectarian war between a ‘secular’ government and ‘Western-backed’ extremists. As an example, here is a paragraph from an article published on StWC website in Apr 2014:

Syria too is rather baffling. We were and are told that radical Islamic terror groups pose the greatest threat to our peace, security and our ‘way of life’ in the West. That al-Qaeda and other such groups need to be destroyed: that we needed to have a relentless ‘War on Terror’ against them. Yet in Syria, our leaders have been siding with such radical groups in their war against a secular government which respects the rights of religious minorities, including Christians. When the bombs of al-Qaeda or their affiliates go off in Syria and innocent people are killed there is no condemnation from our leaders: their only condemnation has been of the secular Syrian government which is fighting radical Islamists and which our leaders and elite media commentators are desperate to have toppled.

It is deeply disturbing that campaigners can organise conferences against Islamophobia but see no contradiction with carrying this material on its website. To lump all Syrians resisting the regime into the camp of ‘al-Qaeda or their affiliates’ or ‘radical Islamists’ simply echoes the anti-Muslim racism heard so often from proponents of the ‘War on Terror’ — the claim that any Muslim or Islamic organisation taking up arms against oppression or dictatorship is ‘al-Qaeda’ and a terrorist.

StWC is looked to by thousands of activists in Britain as the leading voice on issues of war and imperialism. Articles like that above have greatly shaped their understanding of what is happening in Syria. When even the largest anti-war organisation has done no solidarity work for Syrians and actually propagates this racist narrative about their revolution, is it a coincidence that
public opinion swung so hard against Syrian refugees and the Syrian conflict? Opinion polls earlier this year showed 48 percent of those surveyed saying refugees should be turned away.

**International Solidarity and anti-Imperialism**

There was a different course that could have been taken. The anti-war movement could have changed its policies and practice to become not just a narrowly focused, selectively anti-intervention campaign, but a movement building international solidarity with the new revolutionary movements in the Middle East. It could have used its many groups across Britain to organise solidarity protests for the Arab Spring, to tour Tunisia, Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian revolutionaries around universities, workplaces and communities.

The pro-revolution Syrian community protested every single week in London for the first three years of the revolt, before exhaustion and disillusionment set in. The wider anti-war movement could have lent its activists and networks to help with these efforts, and supported the fundraising and aid collections for Syria. Solidarity protests and awareness raising campaigns could have challenged the mainstream narrative about the revolution, and mobilised much needed support for the democratic civil opposition pursuing non-violent resistance to the regime.

Exemplary solidarity work has been carried out by some. Dr David Nutt has travelled to Aleppo a number of times to perform emergency surgery on the wounded. Salford cab driver Alan Henning joined his Muslim co-workers in driving aid convoys to Syria, until he was murdered by ISIS for his solidarity work. Hundreds of people, Muslim and non-Muslim, have travelled to Syria to volunteer with relief efforts, driving ambulances, distributing aid, teaching in refugee camps or running clinics for the wounded. This all took place outside the framework of the anti-war movement, with no support from its organisations.

Assisting these efforts this would have drawn in a whole new generation of activists into the anti-war movement. Young people inspired by the Arab Spring, and especially young Muslims radicalised by the revolutions and mass movements for freedom who now had a clear progressive alternative to nihilistic terrorism or Islamic armed resistance movements. Combining international solidarity with principled and consistent anti-imperialist
politics could have rebuilt the anti-war movement in a new form, with a new generation of activists able to take forward the international struggle for freedom, against war and oppression in all its forms. Instead the anti-war movement stood aside. This stance will have consequences for years to come in Britain and in the Middle East. The forsaking of Syrians, and the resulting rise of ISIS, has created the perfect bogeyman for further attacks on civil liberties, and reinvigorated anti-Muslim racism. It has undermined the political opposition to intervention among the general public, with 60 percent supporting airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The legacy of the war will last for years to come. There are millions of Syrian children living in refugee camps who have missed years of crucial education, and have had to endure terrible poverty and horrific violence. They’ve grown up watching their country being destroyed while the world remained silent. A deep well of bitterness has been sunk, which will take many decades to dry up, and in the meantime will be a ready source of recruits for violent reactionary movements.

The damage has been done by what StWC has said and done over more than four years of war in Syria. The Syrian community protested at the StWC annual event in 2013, demanding they protest against Assad’s violence and support the revolution. These pleas fell on deaf ears. There has been no change in StWC policy. They still hold meetings against the bombing of Syria with no Syrians on the platform and no mention of the regime’s violence.

Those who are active in the anti-war movement, or count themselves as supporters, must do what they can to alter this practice. If they cannot change StWC, they must change their own practice and build new movements of international solidarity so that no peoples are abandoned as the Syrian people have been these past four and half years.
Now in its bloody fourth year of warfare against its own population, the Ba’athist dictatorship in Syria has reached a level of criminality that demands comparison with Franco’s Spain. How and why some of the West’s most prominent intellectuals continue to make excuses for Bashaar al-Assad demands an answer. Here I hope to provide such an answer, as well as to recommend an alternative intellectual and moral approach.

In 1927 Julian Benda wrote *Trahison des Clercs*, a book best known through its English translation ‘*The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*’. Aimed at French and German intellectuals of the 19th and 20th century, Benda—a Jew—sought to answer why so many had succumbed to racism and nationalism. His primary target was Charles Maurras, who despite writing his first scholarly article for a respected philosophy journal at the tender age of 17, ended up as the leading ideologist for *Action Française*, the magazine of a fascist group of the same name that backed the treasonous Vichy regime.

There are two closely related factors that help to explain how Western intellectuals have taken up the cause of a dictatorship that arguably ranks below Vichy in terms of its indifference to civilised norms and human rights. Firstly, there is a tendency to see the Syrian dictatorship through the prism of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was perceived rightly or wrongly as the...
major benefactor of radical third world regimes. That Putin’s Russia has nothing to do with the Soviet Union and that the Syrian economy had been restructured to conform to IMF guidelines does not discourage some from acting as if nothing has changed. Secondly, there is a strong tendency toward Islamophobia. When ISIS, spurned even by al-Qa’ida, was revealed to have a live and let live relationship with al-Assad, the treasonous intellectuals continued to link the rebels with ISIS.

The New York Review of Books

Arguably, the New York Review of Books and its counterpart the London Review of Books have served as latter day equivalents of Action Française, serving up propaganda for a vicious dictatorship that has little connection to its self-flattering image as a beacon of human rights.

Even when the title of an New York Review article foreshadows a condemnation of the Ba’athists, the content remains consistent with the ‘plague on both your houses’ narrative that pervades this intellectual milieu. In a December 5th 2013 article titled ‘Syria: On the Way to Genocide?’, Charles Glass ends up echoing the talking points of more openly Ba’athist elements:

The introduction of chemical weapons, which have been alleged to have been used not only by the government but by the rebels as well, was only the most dramatic escalation by combatants who seek nothing short of the annihilation of the other side.

As is so often the case, the use of the passive voice allows the writer to condemn the rebels without any evidence. “Alleged to have been” leads to the obvious question as to who is responsible for the allegation. Was it Vladimir Putin? Assad’s propaganda nun Mother Agnes Mariam? Inquiring minds would like to know.

On August 20th 2012 Glass penned another article for the Review titled ‘Aleppo: How Syria Is Being Destroyed’ that portrayed the rebels as a wanton mob invading the civilised city. He wrote:

While the urban unemployed had good reason to support a revolution that might improve their chances in life, the thousands who had jobs at the beginning of the revolution and lost them when the Free Army burned their workplaces are understandably resentful. There are stories of workers taking up
arms to protect their factories and risking their lives to save their employers from kidnappers.

Since Charles Glass is a Middle East analyst for NBC News, it is not surprising that he can allude to ‘stories’ of workers taking up arms against the rebels to protect the bosses. NBC is a subsidiary of General Electric, and naturally its analyst will find arguments for preserving Ba’athist rule. You can do business with al-Assad, but the plebian rebels might not have sufficient respect for private property.

Glass was in the graduate program of the American University in Beirut, but did not complete his PhD. His best-known work is ‘Tribes With Flags: A Dangerous Passage Through the Chaos of the Middle East’, a title redolent of Orientalism. In a March 22nd 2011 New York Times column, Thomas Friedman adopted Glass’s thesis to explain why the natives might not be ready for self-rule:

[T]here are two kinds of states in the Middle East: ‘real countries’ with long histories in their territory and strong national identities (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Iran); and those that might be called ‘tribes with flags,’ or more artificial states with boundaries drawn in sharp straight lines by pens of colonial powers that have trapped inside their borders myriad tribes and sects who not only never volunteered to live together but have never fully melded into a unified family of citizens.

Libya and Syria were unfortunate enough to be the kinds of ‘artificial states’ that were unsuited for democracy.

While Glass could never be considered a world-class intellectual, New York Review regular David Bromwich occupies a rather lofty perch at Yale University, where he is Sterling Professor of English. A Sterling Professorship is the highest academic rank at Yale, awarded to the elite’s elite. It has nothing to do with silver but is named after John William Sterling who graduated in 1864 and founded the white shoe New York law firm Shearman & Sterling. He bequeathed a ten-million-dollar endowment to feather the nest of superstar academics like Bromwich, who combines an academic career with less than stellar analyses of current events.

Bromwich wrote an article for the New York Review on 20 Jun 2013 titled ‘Stay out of Syria!’ It was a collection of pro-Ba’athist talking points.
While directed against *New York Times* editor Bill Keller’s urging that the US conduct an Iraq-style invasion, a position that was likely to offend the sensibilities of the *New York Review*’s readers and even more likely to never happen, Bromwich slid easily into slander against those who were forced to take up arms against a vicious dictatorship.

Our Sterling Professor takes the word of ‘qualified investigator’ Carla Del Ponte, a UN commissioner who denied the Ba’athists had deployed sarin: “*This was used on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities.*” This is the very same Del Ponte investigated for prosecutorial misconduct for her role in the aftermath of the Yugoslavia wars as the Guardian reported on August 18th 2010:

> “Some of the witnesses had referred to pressure and intimidation to which they were subjected by investigators for the prosecution,” said a statement from the judge in the Seselj case. “The prosecution allegedly obtained statements illegally, by threatening, intimidating and/or buying [witnesses] off.”

**One Serbian witness said he was offered a well-paid job in the US in return for testimony favourable to the prosecution.**

Bromwich makes sure to mention the crazed rebel who took a bite out of a dead Syrian soldier’s heart. Among those whose goal it is to make al-Assad seem reasonable by comparison, this singular act of a shell-shocked fighter has taken on iconic proportions. We must conclude that in our Yale professor’s moral calculus, the act of firing rockets originally intended to pulverise battleships or hydroelectric dams into tenement buildings is a normal way of conducting warfare, analogous perhaps to prizefighting.

The *New York Review of Books* occupies a unique space in American *belles lettres*. Through its pages academics can address a broad audience about important matters on a weekly basis. Robert Silvers and a few close friends launched it during a strike at the *New York Times* in the winter of 1962-63. Previously Silvers held editorial posts at the *Paris Review* and *Harper’s*. As the Vietnam War and student radicalisation penetrated American consciousness, the magazine regularly featured Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, and even ran an article by Andrew Kopkind backing Chairman Mao’s dictum that “*morality, like politics, flows from the barrel of a gun.*” A do-it-yourself diagram of a Molotov cocktail accompanied the article.
As Silvers and his staff grew older and wealthier, and as the 1960s radicalisation faded, the magazine, following in the footsteps of American liberalism, shifted toward the center—no longer a sounding board for the McGovern wing of the Democratic Party but just another voice accepting the inevitability of Clinton-style neoliberalism.

If Silvers ever feels the need to defend himself against charges that the magazine is giving backhanded support to al-Assad, he points to the occasional article decrying rights violations in Syria, such as Annie Sparrow’s February 20th 2014 piece on the polio epidemic she describes as a “a consequence of the way that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has chosen to fight the war—a war crime of truly epidemic proportions.” While nobody would gainsay the need for such articles, the mendacious reporting of Glass and Bromwich undermines them.

The editors are reflecting the foreign policy imperatives of the Obama administration, which decided long ago that the preservation of Ba’athist rule served American interests. Elite opinion is very sensitive to America’s role as hegemon, the first line of defense for liberal civilisation. Just as it once decided that this meant holding the line against Communism, it now sees Islamic extremism as the first enemy.

For all the hysteria over looming American intervention in Syria, if it does come, it’s more likely to strike jihadist elements of the rebel forces than the dictatorship. On March 13th 2013, the Los Angeles Times reported:

> The CIA has stepped up secret contingency planning to protect the United States and its allies as the turmoil expands in Syria, including collecting intelligence on Islamic extremists for the first time for possible lethal drone strikes, according to current and former U.S. officials.

‘Extremists’ might be interpreted to encompass every fighter not conforming to the Obama administration’s definition of ‘moderate’, almost certainly including those who cry ‘Allahu Akbar’ on destroying a regime helicopter.

**The London Review of Books**

The *London Review of Books* came into existence in 1979 under circumstances akin to the magazine that served as its midwife.
During a yearlong lockout at the London Times when the Times Literary Supplement was put on hold, a TLS editor and others launched the LRB. As they put it jocularly on the LRB website, the magazine “appeared marsupially in the New York Review of Books” until May 1980, when it “jumped out of the parental pouch and became a fully independent literary paper”.

Like Robert Silvers, the current editor of the LRB is of advanced years. Born in 1938, Mary-Kay Wilmers started off as a secretary despite having an Oxford degree—a common fate for women in a sexist industry. Wilmers once described herself as “being captivated by the left, but not of it”. And compared to the New York Review, the LRB is practically Bolshevist. It caused a major stir by publishing the Walt/Mearsheimer attack on the Israel lobby. Sadly, when it comes to Syria (and Libya), its favoured authors can barely be distinguished from Glass and Bromwich.

Wilmers told the London Times (October 18th 2009): “I’m unambiguously hostile to Israel because it’s a mendacious state. They do things that are just so immoral and counterproductive and, as a Jew, especially as a Jew, you can’t justify that.” Like many on the left who have taken up the Palestinian cause, she cannot make the connection with the war in Syria where al-Assad has killed far more Palestinians than Israel over the past three years.

The London Review published a very lengthy and conspiratorial article by Hugh Roberts on November 27th 2011 asking, ‘Who said Gaddafi had to go?’ Roberts argued the dictator had substantial support and would have retained power were it not for NATO intervention. Again, Roberts—Edward Keller Professor of North African and Middle Eastern History at Tufts University—had impressive academic credentials.

Hisam Matar, a Libyan writer whose debut novel In the Country of Men was shortlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize, wrote the LRB to question how Professor Roberts could be untroubled by Gaddafi’s hanging of student protesters from the gates of their university. Matar was perplexed by Roberts’s focus on Gaddafi’s words rather than his deeds.

With an air of ethnocentric contempt he disregards the will of the Libyan people. Indeed, he even disapproves of calling the deposed leader a dictator, and offers Gaddafi’s comical Green Book the respectability of a serious political theory that, according to Roberts, “drew many ordinary Libyans into a sort of
participation in public affairs”. Really? What ‘sort of participation’ was possible when every independent agency and organisation was subdued?

The first and last LRB article in solidarity with the Syrian revolution appeared on March 1st 2012, by novelist and aid worker Jonathan Littell. Littell writes about a young man named Abu Bilal with whom he lived for a few days. He followed Bilal around as he filmed funerals, the wounded, and the dead. He concludes:

> The Western media rarely use these sources, apparently thinking that in the absence of one of their own reporters, these videos of horror ‘cannot be verified’. But these images, sometimes shaky, taken as close as possible to the atrocities, constitute something precious, and those who film them risk their lives every day. As Abu Slimane, an activist from Baba Amro, told me one night, “Our parents were enslaved by fear. We have broken down the wall of fear. Either we conquer, or we die.”

While several other useful articles appeared in 2012, the LRB’s sharp turn against the rebels the following year was signaled by Patrick Cockburn’s 6 June ‘Is it the end of Sykes-Picot?’, circulated widely on the pro-Ba’athist left as incontrovertible evidence of the revolution’s failure.

The Sykes-Picot reference is key since it places Cockburn’s analysis within the framework of International Relations, an academic discipline concerned with statecraft, war, and diplomacy. The actual people on the ground fighting against dictatorship are placed in the background, if seen at all.

From that point on, LRB articles proved increasingly hostile to the revolution, even viewing the bloodstained Ba’athist tyranny as a lesser evil.

Tariq Ali wrote against intervention in Syria on August 28th 2013, prompted by Obama’s ‘red line’ rhetoric—an empty threat given the discussions underway with Iran. Ali made points that had been made repeatedly by Russian and Iranian state TV outlets:

> The Obama administration and its camp followers would like us to believe that Assad permitted UN chemical weapons inspectors into Syria, and then marked their arrival by launching a chemical assault against women and children, about
fifteen kilometres away from the hotel where the inspectors were lodged. It simply does not make sense. Who carried out this atrocity?

One wonders if Ali has ever visited the website of Brown Moses, the British blogger who proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the sarin-laden rockets originated from regime bases. At very least one would expect an intellectual like Ali who serves on the editorial board of Verso to consider arguments—facts, indeed—contrary to his own.

The Obama administration had already entered into negotiations with Iran and was about to break with Saudi Arabia on its support for the rebels—as provisional as it was. Assad was willing to use sarin because he knew a thaw was in the works between America and Iran, and that there was little reason to worry about intervention. His foot-dragging on the elimination of chemical stocks is evidence of how comfortable he feels on this score.

Tariq Ali’s LRB blog piece was a prelude to Seymour Hersh’s ‘Whose Sarin?’, which made news everywhere. Although Hersh is much more of a journalist than an academic or intellectual, the imprimatur of the LRB gave this questionable attempt at investigative reporting more traction than it deserved. It was originally submitted to the New Yorker magazine, where Hersh is a regular contributor. When the editors found it unworthy of publication, Hersh shopped it to the LRB.

Considering Hersh’s storied reputation as the man who broke the My Lai massacre story in 1969, it’s a sorry sign of the general approach to Syria that his standards are abandoned in this case. He relies heavily on unnamed sources in the intelligence community who assure him that the rebels were not only capable of producing sarin but had actually used it. It was up to Eliot Higgins, the Brown Moses blogger, to set Hersh straight in a December 9th 2013 Foreign Policy article. Citing weapons expert Dan Kaszeta, Higgins points out that the amount of sarin required to devastate East Ghouta demands a much larger production infrastructure than the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult needed to produce several litres for its 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway. Since far more gas was used in the Syrian massacre, it would have required a factory and dozens of trained workers—a ludicrous scenario considering the chaos in Syria. On the other
hand, you could apply Occam’s razor and realise that the simplest explanation is correct, namely that Assad had the means and the motivation to break the back of stubborn resistance in the poor suburbs of Damascus.

Oddly enough a 2009 article by Hersh in the *New Yorker* (one the editors found acceptable) foreshadowed the rapprochement between Washington and its erstwhile adversaries:

> Assad’s goal in seeking to engage with America and Israel is clearly more far-reaching than merely to regain the Golan Heights. His ultimate aim appears to be to persuade Obama to abandon the Bush Administration’s strategy of aligning America with the so-called ‘moderate’ Arab Sunni states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—in a coordinated front against Shiite Iran, Shiite Hezbollah, and Hamas.

Obama’s recent willingness to tilt toward Iran is one more illustration of Kissinger’s observation that America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests.

**Slavoj Žižek**

A professional philosopher, author of such thorny texts as *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, and lauded in one memorable back cover blurb as the ‘Elvis of Marxism’, few would question Žižek’s clout as both a major ivory tower figure and a public intellectual. There are few men who can switch from Lacan to *The Matrix* with such ease. Perhaps an inflated sense of his own prowess is the only explanation for Žižek’s shameful musings on Syria.

On 6th September 2013, as solidarity with the Ba’athist dictatorship was reaching fever-pitch in the foolish expectation that Obama would launch an Iraq-style invasion, the philosopher penned ‘Syria is a Pseudo-Struggle’ for the *Guardian*. The outlet made perfect sense since this supposedly liberal newspaper features Jonathan Steele and Seumas Milne, ideologues whose opinions on Syria are scarcely distinguishable from Russian and Iranian media. Along with Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn at the *Independent*, the voices of British liberalism have acquitted themselves poorly.

Directed against a non-existent military intervention, Žižek’s article is laced with slander against the Syrian people. For so
many of the ‘anti-war’ intellectuals and journalists, it seems mandatory to brandish the dove in one hand while plunging a dagger into the back of the rebels with the other. Like Ali and Hersh, he is agnostic on the source of the sarin attack, referring to Bashar al-Assad as “(allegedly) using poisonous gas against the population of his own state”. He continues:

> It seems that whatever remained of the democratic-secular resistance is now more or less drowned in the mess of fundamentalist Islamist groups supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, with a strong presence of al-Qa’ida in the shadows… there are no clear political stakes, no signs of a broad emancipatory-democratic coalition, just a complex network of religious and ethnic alliances overdetermined by the influence of superpowers on the other.

Žižek holds up the ‘good’ Arabs in Egypt who constitute “a strong radical-emancipatory opposition” to oppose the ‘bad’ ones: “As we used to say almost half a century ago, one doesn’t have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows in Syria: towards Afghanistan.”

Context is entirely missing from Žižek’s calculation. In Egypt, there has been relative freedom for ‘civil society’— tenuous but real openings both before and after Tahrir Square. In such an environment, it was possible for ‘radical-emancipatory’ voices to be heard. In Syria such voices are certainly present (if only the media would hear), but snipers aimed their rifles at the heads of peaceful protesters from day one, and the struggle became militarised by necessity. Additionally, the sectarian nature and strategy of Ba’athist rule meant that the opposition would be susceptible to its own forms of sectarianism. The blame for this should be put at Assad’s feet, not at those desperately trying to overthrow his tyranny.

On October 18th 2013 Joseph Daher, a member of the Syrian Revolutionary Left Current and far more qualified to speak about his own country than Žižek with all his laurels, responded on the Syria Freedom Forever blog specifically on the supposed Talibisation of Syria:

> Beginning of October and in September, different FSA brigades voted to expell ISIS from the city of Homs and Idlib. Joint Command of the ‘Free Syrian Army and the forces of revolutionary movement’ issued a statement few weeks ago
asking all foreign fighters in Syria to leave (pro-regime and Al-Qa’ida sisters), and promises to work on the revolution’s values of “freedom, dignity and social justice” and to “retain the independent Syrian decision” from foreign states.

It should be noted that anti-revolution intellectuals have said little about the opposition’s struggle with ISIS (which intensified in early 2014), no doubt because it challenges their reductionist analysis in which such ‘radical-emancipatory’ voices as the Local Coordination Committees are ignored. It is also a function of the profound Islamophobia of an intellectual constellation which recycles the rhetoric of Christopher Hitchens, but on behalf of Syria, Iran, and the Kremlin instead of the Bush White House.

**Robert Dreyfuss and the Nation Magazine**

While journalist Robert Dreyfuss and the *Nation* don’t occupy the Olympian heights of a Slavoj Žižek, they certainly reach many in the academy who consider the magazine a reliable liberal alternative to the mass media.

The *Nation* has usually been content to editorialise about American intervention in Syria, using the Iraq war as an example of what could go wrong. There is also regular commentary on the humanitarian disaster, for which they do blame the dictatorship. All this is par for the liberal course.

But most of the heavy lifting has been left to Dreyfuss, author of *Devil’s Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*. Dreyfuss sees the CIA and Mossad’s fingerprints on everything Islamic.

The worst of many dreadful Dreyfuss columns is the 9 Jun 2012 ‘The United States Must Abandon All Support for the Syrian Rebellion’. Like Žižek’s piece, it recites the alleged crimes and misdemeanors of a rebellion that never lived up the magazine’s expectations.

Dreyfuss poses a rhetorical question:

*More and more, the Syrian rebellion is being reinforced by a flow of militants from Sunni Iraq, including its most radical Islamist elements who, in 2006–07, led the Al Qa’ida–type Islamic Emirate of Iraq. Does the United States really want to get embroiled in a region-wide Sunni-Shiite war?*
Such an odd question to pose. It makes one wonder if Dreyfuss is a careful reader of the New York Times, a newspaper that despite other faults can be relied upon to convey elite opinion. On October 13th 2013, when the Nation, the LRB, et al were most alarmed about a Bush-style ‘regime change’ adventure in Syria, the Times reported on the White House’s aversion to that scenario. The entire article is a challenge to Dreyfuss’s analysis, especially this:

Denis R. McDonough, the deputy national security adviser and one of the biggest skeptics about American intervention in Syria, was promoted to White House chief of staff. Mr. McDonough had clashed frequently with his colleagues on Syria policy, including with Samantha Power, a White House official who had long championed the idea that nations have a moral obligation to intervene to prevent genocide.

Ms. Power came to believe that America’s offers of support to the rebels were empty.

“Denis, if you had met the rebels as frequently as I have, you would be as passionate as I am,” Ms. Power told Mr. McDonough at one meeting, according to two people who attended.

“Samantha, we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” Mr. McDonough responded crisply.

While researching this article, I made a startling discovery—thanks to Wikipedia, the people’s research tool par excellence. It turns out that Dreyfuss was once a member of Lyndon LaRouche’s organisation, a movement as close to classical fascism as any ever seen in the US. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dreyfuss served as director of Middle East Intelligence for Executive Intelligence Review, a LaRoucheite journal. Lyndon Larouche commissioned him to write his first book, Hostage to Khomeini.

Is there any consistency between the Dreyfuss of today and that of 35 years ago? I would argue that there is. The Larouche movement is characterised by conspiracy theories, all directed toward convincing the gullible that nefarious forces are out to sap the vigor of American civilisation. Numerous articles in Executive Intelligence Review promote the idea that Muslim extremists are either witting or unwitting tools of the West. On January 18th 2002 the magazine claimed that the Mossad created Hamas, a conspiracy theory developed originally by Dreyfuss. It
The Betrayal of the Intellectuals on Syria

In Devil’s Game, Dreyfuss laid out a perspective that later became widespread when a section of the left took to demonising Arab and Muslim fighters as pawns of imperialism:

In the early 1980s Israel supported the Islamists on several fronts. It was, of course, supporting the Gaza and West Bank Islamists that, in 1987, would found Hamas. It was, with Jordan, backing the Muslim Brotherhood war against Syria. In Afghanistan, Israel quietly supported the jihad against the USSR, backing the Muslim Brotherhood-linked fundamentalists who led the mujahideen. And Israel backed Iran, the militant heart of the Islamist movement, during its long war with Iraq.

In the intellectual universe Dreyfuss inhabits, there is no greater insult than to be a CIA or Mossad asset. Anti-revolution leftists oscillate between this sort of unproven smear against the Syrian rebels, and viewing them as inimical to ‘American interests’. Whatever this lacks in intellectual coherence they seek to compensate for through repetition and vehemence.

Michael Neumann

After surveying the rubbish-strewn landscape of Ba’athist apologetics, it’s a relief to discover that at least one highly qualified academic has bucked the trend. In 1968 Michael Neumann was a senior at Columbia University and deeply involved in the anti-war movement. Like the best of that generation, he never gave up his principles as he pursued his career. He is a full professor of philosophy at Trent University in Ontario, Canada, where he started his career in 1975. Despite specialising in ethics, Neumann’s sense of right and wrong flows much more from his anti-war activism than from Plato.

There needs to be a clear distinction between the pseudo-politics of bearing witness, of ‘supporting’ something and ‘taking a stand’, and the politics of trying to have some effect, however tiny, on the world. This distinction has largely been lost.

I’ve come to feel that serious politics focuses on facts, not theories. No theory is needed, only the facts and some mom-and-pop ethical principles that people can only pretend to reject. And serious politics needs to be brutally realistic and brutally mind-
ful of priorities. Suppose, for example, freedom and democracy really do conflict with helping the poor? Too many leftists won’t even accept the reality of the dilemma, let alone say that helping the poor is more important. I have no time for such people.

Neumann is a long-standing critic of Israel. He is a supporter of the BDS movement, wrote a book, The Case Against Israel, and after the bloody 2008-2009 IDF assault on Gaza, asked the Israeli government to remove his grandmother’s name from the Vad Yashem holocaust memorial.

Many pro-Palestinian activists, however, willingly echoed Ba’athist narratives on Syria. Among them is Jonathan Cook, who has written three books on the Palestinian struggle, and who endorsed Seymour Hersh’s sarin conspiracy. Cook’s moral and intellectual flaws are based on the false premise that Israel regards the Syrian regime as a mortal enemy and from the fact that a Palestinian splinter group in Syria—the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command—serves the Assad regime. What was Neumann’s take on this?

I feel these people are deeply misguided, unforgivably so, but their position is at least entirely understandable.

It’s quite simple, though someone like Cook won’t admit even to himself some parts of what he knows. The Palestinians are screwed on the ground; they can’t fight Israel. Israel has absolutely no incentive to make peace and is now so powerful that it is virtually immune from international pressure. Until very recently the best hope for the Palestinians was that Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, could make things uncomfortable enough for the Israelis that peace had at least a slight chance. So naturally Cook et al. hang on to that hope.

This might be quite a dilemma—can you support a monster like Assad even to help the Palestinians?—except that the hope is dead as a doornail. Even if Assad escapes with his skin, he will be no use to anyone, and Hezbollah is only going to get weaker as its lifeline degenerates. If Cook and others faced this, they wouldn’t disgrace themselves through their sneaking support for the ‘admittedly brutal’ Syrian regime.

My final question to Michael Neumann was how he had arrived at his views on Syria. Like me, Neumann was regular contributor to Counterpunch, the website run by Alexander Cockburn whose
publishing arm midwifed *The Case Against Israel*. While *Counterpunch* could never be mistaken for the *New York Review of Books*, it does publish some writers who would not be out of place there. Neumann answered:

*First of all, there are three basically pro-Assad strains in Counterpunch. The first, as I suggested, is Cook’s. The second involves a bunch of ‘old Syria hands’: Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn and Patrick Seale. These old farts loved their days in Damascus (and Beirut) and won’t let go. The realities are best captured by this unforgettable piece: A Eulogy for the Damascus Bourgeoisies. I’ll assume these superannuated journalists are of no great interest to either of us. Their views don’t have much to do with the general Counterpunch outlook. Yes, you could say I went through an evolution, starting quite a few years ago. I suppose two factors were the main cause of my change.*

*For one thing, I came to believe, like much of the world, that the US was weak. Like much of the world, I believe it lost, hands down, in Vietnam and Iraq, and will certainly lose in Afghanistan. I’m prepared to argue that these were military defeats. This of course doesn’t square with Counterpunch’s incurably American idea of American power, and consequently of American menace.*

*Second, I came to be associated through personal connections with a Syrian/Lebanese/Egyptian milieu. Since the Western left, properly speaking, hasn’t achieved anything in living memory, I came to find this milieu and of course the world it derived from a lot more interesting than the left. The Middle Eastern people also seemed much closer to reality, and that reality despite everything holds out a tiny bit of hope. Politically, the record suggests that the West is simply a lost cause.*

*The result is a real difference in outlook between me and most Counterpunch types, not to mention the bright lights of the Review of Books world. Most of these people have no idea what’s happening in Syria because they’re not interested: they’re only interested in each other and their sins-of-the-West obsessions. The very idea that there should be some genuine happenings in Syria is for them a non-starter, because, far more than the colonialists before them, they see Middle Eastern people as incapable of agency: these ‘Arabs’ are just pawns in the terribly*
important games of America and an imaginary ‘anti-imperialist’ block.

I support the Syrian revolution because I’ve actually tried to learn something about it, in detail. I have the luxury of having been able to spend maybe four hours a day looking at a wide range of sources from inside (or just outside) Syria, for about three years. On my blog I refute some of the sillier things people say about events.

Here are a few things I know that most Counterpunch people don’t.

The Syrian uprising is the most thoroughly popular revolution we’ve seen in ages, perhaps since 1789. It has not ‘fragmented’ into hundreds or thousands of groups; it was never a united movement and it never had a vanguard. It is to a large extent poor, young, rural and socially conservative. The fight is not a proxy war because no one is obeying any external actors, whose support is piddling. As for the notion that the US supports the revolution, or has some oily agenda that would involve supporting it, that’s ossified thinking when the US is awash in oil.

Then there’s the fear that the revolution will bring radical Islamists to power. That’s nonsense: once Assad falls, everyone will be united against the extreme Islamists: the Saudis, Qatar, the Russians, the Iranians and Iraq, the Israelis, the West, the Kurds, and Turkey, not to mention secular Syrians. The extremists, whose hard core is indeed largely foreign, will lack both the supplies and the support to survive. The many teenage Syrians who joined up solely to fight the regime will deplete their own units.

As for the rest, yes, of course, many of the revolutionaries don’t hold Counterpunch values. But if we learned anything from Marx it would be that ultimate objectives aren’t even on the agenda until the historical conditions are in place. In Syria as in many other Middle Eastern countries, secularist regimes have brought nothing but bloody disaster, so that progress can come only via Islamist regimes. This is far preferable to Assad. It doesn’t matter what Assad may have done or supported or represented in the past. For one thing, as I said earlier, he’s finished. For another, the idea that we have a dilemma between ruthless realism and starry-eyed idealism is absurd. Whatever Castro may think, Assad isn’t Castro and he isn’t Father Stalin. He’s a rather typical spoilt Middle Eastern male who’s been
crossed, and turned into a full-out monster. He has no cause and advances no cause. If you're going to back a regime that sodomizes with broken bottles, castrates children and inserts rats in women's vaginas, maybe you should ask yourself what you're hoping will be achieved. The left doesn't ask that because it's become a stranger to the very idea of achievement. All it wants is to have, in newspeak, its ‘narratives’ confirmed, and it confirms them by making stuff up. That's why I prefer reading and writing for Middle Eastern people, or at least in what I conceive to be their interests.

Noam Chomsky addressed the question of intellectual responsibility in the New York Review of Books in 1967, when the magazine was far less reflective of the inside-the-beltway consensus. His starting-point was an article on the same question by Dwight Macdonald in the 1957 Politics magazine. Macdonald had left the American Trotskyist movement over what he perceived as its Stalinist-type authoritarianism. According to Wikipedia, he “denounced Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union for first urging the Poles to rebel in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and then halting the Red Army outside of the borders of Warsaw as the German Army crushed the Poles, liquidating its leadership”. Considering the resemblance of places like Yarmouk and Homs to the Warsaw Ghetto, one imagines that if Macdonald were alive today, he too would be speaking out.

Macdonald certainly would have agreed with Chomsky's dismissal of the claim that the Syrian revolution was a plot hatched in Langley, Virginia. In an interview conducted by Mohammad al-Attar on 13 Jul 2013, Chomsky succinctly described how Assad forced the revolution into taking up arms:

I don't think the Syrians made a choice. It happened in the wake of the regime's repressive response. Syrians could either have surrendered or taken up arms. To blame them is akin to saying that the Vietnamese made a mistake responding by force when their US-backed government started committing massacres. Sure, the Vietnamese made a choice to arm themselves, but the alternative was to accept still more massacres. It's not a serious critique.

The comparison with Vietnam is key. For a left that lives in the past, when the Soviet Union defended countries struggling against imperialism, even if as fecklessly as Stalin, the support
of Putin’s Kremlin for the Ba’athist slaughter somehow becomes warranted. This willful neglect of historical change would be like someone supporting Bush’s war on Iraq because he was a member of Abraham Lincoln’s party.

It’s a tragedy for the left intelligentsia that so many who came of age in the 1960s like Tariq Ali cannot understand how much the Vietnamese peasant and his Syrian brothers and sisters today have in common. Like the Vietnamese struggling to break the chains of colonial rule, the Syrians are trying to remove a dictatorship as accommodating to imperial designs as the one in Saigon. Never forget that the Ba’athists suppressed Palestinians in Lebanon and tortured rendered suspects for the CIA.

In the 1960s the left was vigilant to tell the truth about American foreign policy. In many ways, the responsibility of intellectuals today is exactly the same as it was back then, but is made more difficult by the tendency of some to automatically put a minus where Samantha Powers or Nicholas Kristof puts a plus. Our obligation is to tell the truth independently of the geopolitical chess game. When a section of the left opts for blind loyalty to Syria, Russia and Iran (as the ‘silent majority’ fell in step behind Nixon), it forfeits its right to speak in the name of social justice. If you apply the guidelines Chomsky made in the 1967 article to today’s world, you will be able to distinguish the truth from the lie.

It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass over without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious. Thus we have Martin Heidegger writing, in a pro-Hitler declaration of 1933, that “truth is the revelation of that which makes a people certain, clear, and strong in its action and knowledge”. Americans tend to be more forthright. When Arthur Schlesinger was asked by The New York Times in November 1965 to explain the contradiction between his published account of the Bay of Pigs incident and the story he had given the press at the time of the attack, he simply remarked that he had lied; and a few days later, he went on to compliment the Times for also having suppressed information on the planned invasion, in ‘the national interest’.

When so many leftist intellectuals today have decided to act on behalf of what they so wrongly perceive to be ‘the national interests’ of Syria, up to the point of circulating lies after the
fashion of Arthur Schlesinger, we have our work cut out for us. It is in our interest and that of the Syrian people not to shirk that duty.
The Arab revolutions that started in the winter of 2010 have wreaked havoc with political certainties. At the ‘Festival of Dangerous Ideas’ last year, the British-Pakistani intellectual Tariq Ali lamented the fracturing of the anti-Imperialist movement over Libya and Syria. A decade earlier, Iraq had brought together people from diverse backgrounds—Marxists, liberals, realists, anarchists, libertarians—all united in opposition to a war they believed would be disastrous. The alliances held and the coordination proved useful. It rolled back the worst excesses of unilateral interventionism. Then came the Arab Spring.

Everyone applauded the toppling of Tunisia’s Ben Ali and Egypt’s Mubarak. They also cheered the expulsion of Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh. In each case, the Obama administration dragged its feet, wary of supporting revolts against friendly despots. The administration’s response was also sluggish when Muammar Gaddafi responded to a popular uprising with a rampage. But under pressure from European and Arab allies, Obama relented and a UN-sanctioned military intervention halted Gaddafi’s advance, eventually toppling him.

But as Gaddafi’s tanks were rolling towards Ben Ghazi, some dissidents allowed humanitarian concerns to get the better of

1. Sic (ed).
their political judgment—they backed the military intervention (or objectively backed it by failing to condemn it). Anti-imperialism hasn’t been the same since.

By the time the uprising in Syria started, committed anti-imperialists were better prepared. They barricaded themselves against their former, constitutionally weak, comrades who seemed enchanted by the slogans issuing from Syria’s velvet revolutionary quarters. Dignity! Self-determination! Human rights! A spell had been cast. The regime was facing a mortal threat. Syria—this citadel of Arabism, this bulwark of resistance, this multi-cultural Elysium, this seat of Mars, this boudoir of Venus, this mellifluous symphony, this happy breed of men, this bare-headed parade of women—was beset by sedition and the hand of war. The envious had suborned its masses, and treachery was undermining its walls. By rising up against Bashar al-Assad, a leader resisting Western subversion, the people of Syria had turned themselves into objective proxies of imperialism. They had forfeited their right to anti-imperialist sympathy, or even attention.

But like persistent ghosts, Assad’s opponents continue to haunt anti-imperialist imagination, eroding certainties and sowing doubt. Ignoring them is not enough. They keep claiming headlines by dying in spectacular ways. Organisations like the Stop the War Coalition have taken affirmative action by banning all Syrians from their platforms (all except two—luckily both of them regime supporters). Out of sight, out of mind—or so we hoped. Except, they kept intruding into our sights and minds, if not as victims, then as self-righteous scolds. Some Syrians even managed to infiltrate a recent StWC meeting on Syria at the British House of Parliament and arrogantly insisted on having a voice. Despite the best efforts of the chair (Diane Abbott), they sapped anti-imperialist morale by diverting attention from Assad’s strategic value to his alleged crimes.

Assad admittedly hasn’t made it easy for anti-imperialists to stand by him. His behaviour might make sense politically but can sometimes cause moral anguish among those uninitiated in anti-imperialist precepts. Even George Galloway finds it hard to openly salute his courage and indefatigability. Assad is resisting the larger part of his population and, except for the military support of the Russian Army, Hizbullah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Crop (IRGC), Iraqi militias and an international brigade of sectarian volunteers—and the diplomatic support of
China and Egypt—he has no one on his side. He needs protecting. Until he has vanquished imperialism (labelled ‘the people’ by Western corporate media) we need to ensure that sentimental concerns with ‘human rights’ don’t pre-empt it. A coherent set of arguments is therefore in order in order to ensure Assad’s victory.

To Support Assad, Deny That You Support Assad

In their understandable eagerness to applaud Assad’s resistance to empire, some anti-imperialists have openly embraced him. Former Democratic congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and The Wikileaks Party, led by Julian Assange’s father, went on solidarity tours of Damascus; Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mairead Maguire promoted one of Assad’s close allies; Britain’s Stop the War Coalition invited the same person to its ‘antiwar’ conference. This is a mistake. It diminishes one’s claims to objectivity and puts one in the complicated position of having to defend every blemish in Assad’s otherwise admirable record. It is far more fruitful to focus on his opponents’ crimes. It is imperative therefore that you preface every statement in support of Assad with: “I am no fan of Assad but…” This is also insurance against possible errors of judgment. Should Assad do something really horrible in the future (the possibility cannot be ruled out—terrible things happen in war) this caveat will excuse you.

Also, your credibility is enhanced if you can pronounce yourself a supporter of the earlier ‘peaceful and democratic’ protests. It is not necessary for you to have supported them at the time; you can do so retrospectively. Describe the original protest in pure and idealistic terms all the better to contrast with the present mayhem. But do not dwell on this too much lest someone ask what forced these protests to turn into an armed insurgency. Not all of Assad’s actions are defensible and by drawing attention to them, you reinforce the interventionist argument.

The Iraq and Libya Precedents

In 2003 the US and Britain launched an unprovoked war on Iraq that killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and left the region in perpetual turmoil. In 2011, Western powers intervened in Libya on humanitarian pretexts and the country hasn’t
been at peace since. Use the two precedents to counter any calls for action in Syria. But be careful not to let the argument devolve from the emotive to the rational. Otherwise advocates for intervention could counter by noting that in 2003 Iraq wasn’t at war, while Syria has been at war for over four years; Iraq was falsely accused of possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction, while Syria has actually used them; Iraq was disarmed and contained, while Syria brandishes its arsenal with impunity. More importantly, in Iraq, humanitarian rationales were only used in retrospect; in Syria the case for a no-bombing zone has always had a humanitarian impulse.

But if there is no comparison between Iraq and Syria, the comparison with Libya is strained. NATO intervened in Libya on humanitarian pretexts and used it to assist the rebel forces in effecting regime change. This was an overreach and has given us reasonable grounds to be sceptical of humanitarian motives. But the NATO intervention was popular in Libya with 75 per cent of the population supporting it. The subsequent instability has a lot more to do with the weakness of the new state and the interference of Egypt and the Arab Emirates. A United Nations stabilisation force could have prevented this, giving the state time to strengthen itself. For this reason, it’s the symbolic significance of Libya, the images of chaos, rather than the details of conflict that are important.

Anti-imperialists must make every effort however to stave off the Bosnia analogy. It is the anti-imperialist’s kryptonite, since there is no real answer to it. After three years of slaughter and nearly a quarter million dead, it took a brief intervention to induce the Serbs into negotiating and the region has been at peace in the two decades since. The cognitive dissonance caused by the invocation of this precedent can be fatal to the anti-imperialist argument.

Don’t Defend Assad–Attack His Opponents

Peace and security have a price. When a state is trying to restore law and order and citizens take up arms, firm action becomes necessary. A true leader cannot ignore the threat gathering against his state. He has to anticipate the peril and pre-empt it with force. Critics have accused Assad of responding to peaceful protests with force, but if anything, Assad deserves praise for
anticipating his opponents' propensity for violence and, through a progressive escalation of force, inducing them to reveal their true, violent character. But the strategy wasn't without risk and mistakes were made. It is not necessary therefore to defend all of Assad's actions. Indeed, your credibility is enhanced if you concede that the Assad regime has made mistakes. But don't get trapped in defending his record—focus on his opponents.

The opposition is broad, without a coherent hierarchy or structure. It lacks discipline. It has people from all walks of life, many opportunists, even criminals. It is inevitable that some of them will do ghastly things. Amplify these as indicative of the true character of the opposition. Remember the rebel who ate a dead regime soldier's lung? Everyone does. How many still speak of Hamza al-Khatib, the 13-year-old who was picked up by Syrian government soldiers in April 2011 and returned in a casket after a month's detention, with burns and bruises, severed genitals, and three gunshot wounds on his body? None.

A Will to Disbelieve

Like other reformers, Assad has made mistakes. It was perhaps not necessary to kill al-Khatib or to napalm school playgrounds. But when people brainwash their children and use them as instruments of sedition, the state cannot stand idly by. Though tragic, such deaths can sometimes have the edifying effect of dissuading other parents from leading their children astray. But while the political necessity of such actions is understandable, prolonged encounter with systematic repression can still cause distress in the sympathetic observer. For this reason, effective anti-imperialism needs psychological discipline. It requires a strong will to disbelieve.

An anti-imperialist has no obligation to follow any atrocity for which imperialism cannot be held responsible. Anti-imperialists' default attitude toward an atrocity by a state currently in the bad books of imperialist powers should be one of resolute disbelief. When a regime militia killed 108 people in Houla, anti-imperialists rightly doubted the story. When the regime used chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta, deductive logic was sufficient to deny regime responsibility, UN and Human Rights Watch reports notwithstanding. Indeed, to counter accusations that it is too sympathetic to Assad, the Stop the War Coalition
recently published an article by journalist Matt Carr reiterating doubts that the regime was responsible for the attack.

Denial, however, has its limits. Doubt, on the other hand, can render longer service.

Functional Doubt

In journalism and scholarship, doubt has a cachet. To be sceptical is to be savvy—it is not to be a dupe. But doubt also has a political function. Sometimes reality fails to oblige and facts do not favour one’s argument. Under those circumstances, one has to be mindful of larger considerations. Precipitate action can be avoided, or postponed, if its premisses are rendered doubtful. ‘Doubt is our product’, is the advice that PR companies gave the tobacco industry after science established an irrefutable link between cigarette smoking and cancer. The industry hired hacks to play up the doubt and people continued to smoke. Regulation was postponed by decades. Similarly, former US vice president Dick Cheney used residual doubts about climate change to postpone environmental regulation.

Anti-imperialists can also put doubt to excellent effect. If conceding a point can undermine the larger cause of anti-imperialism, doubt can be used to avoid resolution. In August 2013, when Assad used chemical weapons to attack opposition neighbourhoods, the regime’s responsibility was quickly established. But while the courageous few—most notably Seymour Hersh and Robert Fisk—chose to clumsily blame the attack on Assad’s opponents, thereby inviting refutation, savvier anti-imperialists adopted an attitude of doubt. Long after the debate was settled, stalwarts like Seumas Milne, Phyllis Bennis and Charles Glass used doubt to deflect attention from the regime’s responsibility. This kept public opinion divided and imperialist aggression was avoided.

Sympathise Selectively

An anti-imperialist must know that sympathy is not a luxury—it carries costs. If one is indiscriminate in one’s sympathies, one could inadvertently end up serving imperialist interests. In May 2012, when a regime militia killed 108 civilians, including 49 children, in the town of Houla using grisly means, the possibility
of an intervention was raised. The weak and sentimental were swayed into sympathy but few anti-imperialists lost their nerve. They all focused on preventing imperialist aggression by deflecting attention from the culprit. They shifted the blame onto the besieged and used *cui bono* logic to blame them for staging their own deaths. The accusation that Assad’s opposition staged the deaths might have been farfetched, originating with a right-wing German columnist who never visited Houla, but it was not unreasonable to accuse the victims of complicity, since through their obtrusive grief, they were offering imperialists a possible pretext for aggression.

Likewise, no anti-imperialist succumbed to cheap sympathy for the over 1,400 dead after the regime’s gassing of Eastern Ghouta. They correctly reasoned that instead of focusing on the immutable, it was more urgent to prevent future deaths that might occur should imperial powers use the massacre as a pretext for intervention. The immediate concern for anti-imperialists was therefore not to condemn the perpetrators or demand accountability, but to erase the pretext for intervention by shifting the blame onto Assad’s opponents. *Cui bono* logic was once again deployed to deny that Assad was responsible because they argued they did not see how Assad could possibly gain from such an attack. When logic is infallible, facts become dispensable.

But this doesn’t mean that anti-imperialists have to turn a blind eye to all atrocities. Two weeks after the Ghouta massacre when the New York Times revealed that the anti-Assad rebels had executed seven regime soldiers, anti-imperialists were rightly incensed. In commentaries and interviews after the incident, Yale professor David Bromwich expressed outrage at the killings while simultaneously suggesting that Assad wasn’t responsible for the chemical attack. In a bravura display of intellectual agility, Bromwich also maintained that Assad, who didn’t launch the chemical attack, launched it for a good reason: the neighbourhoods were harbouring insurgents.

**Defend Peace and Sovereignty**

Imperialism has no regard for the sovereignty of others. It is the anti-imperialist’s duty to help preserve it. Justice and Liberty can often be enemies of peace and sovereignty. Prioritise the latter. ‘No justice, no peace’ is a fine slogan, but exporting it
to other peoples is no less presumptuous than exporting democracy. Should anyone ask from whence Arab states derive their sovereignty when the people are in revolt, remind them that the Arab world is not ready for democracy. It cannot be held to the same standards as Western states. That’s orientalism. The Arab world needs reformers, and reformers are necessarily paternalistic. (The choice however has to be situational, so that it allows for condemning a Mubarak and praising a Gaddafi at the same time).

‘Liberty or death’ is a recipe for civil unrest. First and foremost, people need peace, and only an iron-fisted government can ensure this. In Syria, decry the slaughter and condemn the rebellion that is pre-empting peace by refusing to accede to the state’s authority. Praise those who surrender, describe them (as Patrick Cockburn and Charles Glass have) as ‘local peace deals’, and hold them as models for resolution. What Syria really needs is a ‘peace process’, one without justice or accountability as pre-conditions. A ‘peace process’ has resolved the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can resolve Syria too.

Call for an Arms Embargo

There are few people who would oppose a ceasefire or an arms embargo (at least not without inviting accusations of warmongering). Call for both. They’ll both have the same effect of preserving the current power imbalance. Should there be a complete arms embargo, the regime will retain its military superiority. And should there be a ceasefire, it will help the regime—which suffers from a manpower shortage—consolidate its position. The opposition on the other hand will lose its element of surprise, something that it has used to its advantage in lieu of parity in arms.

Oppose any arms supplies to the opposition from imperial powers. And should they receive any, highlight these to pronounce their cause tainted. Advert to the historical example of Western arms supplies to the Afghan mujahideen and how it led to Al Qaeda and 9/11 (but don’t bring up the 1990s lest it complicate the chain of causation). Historical analogy however can be a double-edged sword: avoid Vietnam references lest someone bring up the fact that no anti-imperialist considered Vietnamese guerrillas’ cause tainted for the backing of imperial Soviet Union.
Be not indiscriminate in your opposition to arms supplies. Most anti-imperialists showed admirable flexibility in opposing military support for the Free Syria Army but demanding arms and intervention on behalf of the Kurdish YPG. The latter are socialists and anti-imperialists; they deserve support, even if it is from imperial powers. US bombing in support of Kurds against ISIS in Kobane ultimately served an anti-imperialist purpose. As tenacious anti-imperialist sleuths like Seumas Milne have established, ISIS is in fact an American creation (though anti-imperialists must dissuade commoners from reading the documentary evidence lest they be misled—always a real possibility with those not initiated in anti-imperialist catechisms).

**Champion the Minorities**

Minorities hold a vulnerable position in many societies. Legal protections for minorities are a great achievement of the civilised world. But in history, concern for minorities has sometimes been used as a justification for imperial intervention. There is no reason why the same concern cannot also be harnessed to an anti-imperialist cause. The fact that in Syria the Sunni majority has borne the brunt of the violence must not distract us from the potential danger of regime collapse for Syria's minorities. Majorities can look after themselves. The anti-imperialist's duty is to defend a government that is protecting minorities by preemptively liquidating the majority. Fortunately this is no longer a sectional concern. Leaders from Hungary and Poland to governors in the US have recognized the vulnerability of minorities and refused to accept refugees from Syria until they are 'proven Christian'.

**God Sends ISIS**

ISIS is the *deus ex machina* of the Syrian conflict. It resolves many contradictions. One can take absolute positions in relation to ISIS in a way one can't with any other aspect of the conflict. For far too long, anti-imperialists have been accused of indifference toward the colossal human suffering in Syria. You can use ISIS to erase this impression. There are no moral complications in sympathising with victims of ISIS and condemning its crimes. Detractors might point out that over 95 percent of the civilian
deaths in Syria have been caused by the regime, but you can counter that by noting that at least the regime is secular.

ISIS can also help anti-imperialists’ make their support for Assad explicit. Some, like Patrick Cockburn, are already blazing a path in this regard by advocating Western support for the regime. John Pilger has pronounced Russia, Iran, Hizbullah and the regime the “only effective opponents of ISIS”. Even Noam Chomsky has criticised Obama for not supporting the regime, which—according to him—is one of the main forces fighting ISIS. Visionaries like Chomsky, Pilger and Cockburn are imagining a brave new world in which imperialism would itself serve anti-imperialist ends and facts will be displaced by feelings. (Chomsky’s feelings about the regime’s efficacy in fighting ISIS are far more relevant than the fact that the regime has avoided ISIS in all but six percent of its military encounters).

Frame Arguments Against Bombing as Arguments for Bombing

Bodies have been piling up in Syria and the regime’s aerial bombings are being blamed as a main cause of civilian deaths. Calls for a no-bombing zone have been growing. The idea is ostensibly to protect civilians from barrel bombs dropped by the regime’s helicopters and jets. This argument has a prima facie attraction that could give it wider purchase, thereby serving as a pretext for imperialist intervention. It must be resisted and its appeal diminished. For this it is necessary to recast the case for a no-bombing zone as a case to ‘bomb Syria’: this would make it easier to argue against. Indeed, this is precisely how Labour’s Diane Abbot, the SNP’s Alex Salmond, and the Green Party’s Caroline Lucas have reframed the question. By taking strong positions against the hypothetical bombing of Syria by the West they have deflected attention from the actual bombing of Syria by Assad, thus protecting Syria’s civilians from imperialist aggression. Anti-imperialists, who have long been accused of indifference toward victims of bombings in Syria, can banish this impression by showing their deep concern for Syrians who might die in a Western intervention. Those who keep mentioning Assad’s atrocities are merely paving the way for NATO aggression, which would cause real human suffering.
The Value of Refugees

Close to 12 million Syrians are now displaced. Over seven million of them remain inside Syria's borders. Human rights organisations keep harping on about the danger posed to them by ISIS and the regime. But they are beyond our reach, so are not our concern. It is the ones fleeing to Europe we need to focus on. They are an uncomplicated cause to champion that doesn't raise vexing political dilemmas. In the past we have dismissed aid and charity as distractions from root causes. But in this case, the root cause (the majority of refugees cite the regime's military campaign as the reason for their flight) might lead to calls for military action to constrain Assad. For this reason, anti-imperialists must dismiss any discussion of root causes as 'political', a distraction from the immediate 'humanitarian' concerns. This also gives anti-imperialists an opportunity to show the imperialist powers' hypocrisy by highlighting their inadequate response. Anti-imperialist concerns might have prevented us from supporting Syrians' political rights as citizens in Syria—but that doesn't mean we can't support their residual human rights as refugees in Europe.

Tragedy is a Natural Phenomenon

Refer to the slaughter in Syria as a tragedy rather than a crime. A crime presupposes a culprit; a tragedy could have natural causes. Causes are enemies of progress. For long we have focused on the causes of poverty, inequality, crime, and disease to question strategies that only address symptoms. But to achieve peace in Syria, we have to avoid bringing up causes lest they draw attention to the regime and give imperial aggressors a pretext for intervention. Be careful in how you refer to the conflict. 'Civil war' is a useful description since it implies a parity of forces; 'violence' is better since it leaves agency vague. Saying that people are fleeing Syria's 'violence' allows an anti-imperialist to sympathise with the refugees without bringing up the author of their exodus.

None of this, however, should prevent the anti-imperialist from speaking about the Iraq war as the origin of all the turmoil, or from trying to find causes of terrorism in Western foreign policy.
Learn From Enemies

Finally, in a complex world no ideology can survive that isn’t flexible or adaptive. Anti-imperialism too has to deal with contradictions—and it has much to learn. In some instances it has already shown great flexibility. At home anti-imperialists have long railed against rampant Islamophobia, but abroad they have demonstrated great agility in adopting its tropes. There are takfiris, salafis, and jihadis among Assad’s myriad opponents: why not label them all takfiris, salafis and jihadis? It works for the Israelis. When it comes to dissimulation, one should turn to the masters. When Israelis bomb civilians in Gaza, or besiege them, they claim it is only to kill the terrorists hiding among them. Using the same logic, anti-imperialists have blamed the siege and bombing of the Yarmouk refugee camp on the rebels hiding among the people.

Anti-imperialists have also shown exemplary agility in taking absolute positions on collective punishment and torture practiced by imperial powers but recognising their necessity for resistance regimes in fighting imperialist subversion. Anti-imperialists see no reason to succumb to the emotional blackmail of torture photos and legalistic quibbles. Just as Israelis have responded to criticisms of their policies in Gaza by asking, “But what about Darfur?”, when torture is brought up, the anti-imperialist must ask: “But what about Abu Ghraib?” If they bring up the bombings of cities, “What about Fallujah?” you must ask. If they mention collective punishment, you must counter: “But what about Gaza?”

Think Situationaly

Break any of these rules sooner than do something outright barbarous like oppose the Russian intervention in Syria. Russian intervention, unlike Western military action, is necessary and effective. It is not imperialism. As the celebrated anti-imperialist intellectual Noam Chomsky has confirmed, Russia intervened at the behest of the Syrian government, therefore its actions cannot be compared to the West’s, which are inherently imperialistic. (Be careful, however, not to extend this argument too far, otherwise you’ll be forced to concede that the US intervention in Vietnam, initiated at the South Vietnamese government’s request, wasn’t imperialism either.)
The Russian intervention has rendered the possibility of Western aggression moot. Imperialism has been thwarted for now. But should the hydra raise its head again—in the form of a dead refugee on a beach, a little girl crying for her mutilated parents, or teachers beheaded by a barrel bomb—we’ll need intellectual discipline to hold the anti-imperialist line. These arguments, or variations thereof, have foiled imperial aggression before. Their obstructive power is formidable. Let’s feed the hypnopaedic machine.
Sam Charles Hamad: The Rise of Daesh in Syria—Some Inconvenient Truths

Oh Allah, strike the apostate rulers,  
Oh Allah, kill them one after the other, sparing none.  
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

A harsh and violent upbringing has its consequence that violence dominates the soul and prevents the development of the personality. Energy gives way indolence, and wickedness, deceit, cunning and trickery are developed by fear of physical violence. These tendencies soon become ingrained habits, corrupting the human quality which men acquire through social intercourse. Such men become dependent on others for protection; their souls even become too wicked to acquire virtue or moral beauty. They become ingrown... This is what happened to every society which has been dominated by others and harshly treated.  
Ibn Khaldun

Ever since its rise in Syria and blitzkrieg of much of Northern and Western Iraq, resulting in the declaration of a Khilafah in June 2014¹, the world has been transfixed with wonder, intrigue and fear with the entity calling itself the ‘Islamic State’ (henceforth derogatorily referred to by the Arabic acronym ‘Daesh’). Millions of words have been devoted to this organisation, its roots, ideologies and goals, and yet a fog of mythology and conspiracy dominates the subject. As is often the case, these mythologies are politically charged and range from the superficially plausible to outright absurdity, and from the subtle to the lurid.

They all have one thing in common; the necessity to obscure rather than elucidate the material realities of Daesh and the con-

1. bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28082962
text in which it arose, particularly the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime and the actual dynamics of the consequent revolutionary war. Conspiracy narratives regarding Daesh are by no means restricted to the darkest corners of the internet, but have seeped into mainstream discourse, with respected media outlets and intellectuals, as well as powerful political figures, ranging from the Prime Minister of Iraq, to Bashar al-Assad, to the leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition in the UK, all attributing the rise of Daesh to funding from Gulf states, with Saudi Arabia in particular being singled out.

At the heart of the Daesh conspiracy narratives is the Syrian revolution, and thus their proponents tend to be those who, to some degree, support the Assad regime and its allies or at least share Assad’s hostility to the revolutionary forces he faces. Below we seek to explain why understanding the roots of these narratives is extremely important for those of us who support the Syrian revolution and actively want to see the forces of counter-revolution, whether Assad or Daesh, vanquished.

The Assad regime’s ability to control the narrative about the revolutionary war has been one of its great successes, with much of the mainstream media and particular media figures around the world either enthusiastically accepting it or slowly and tacitly acquiescing to it. A major part of this has been the rise of Daesh, whose photogenic terror has eclipsed the Assad regime’s much more destructive but much less visceral (at least to a global audience) terror.

It is obvious why Saudi Arabia would be considered a likely suspect for funding an entity that it apparently resembles—both are said to formally represent an ideology called ‘Wahhabism’ so, logically speaking, it follows that there must be some connection between them. While this is the most prominent topic of the conspiracy narratives about Daesh’s rise, this essay will seek to both demystify the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Daesh and provide an account of Daesh rooted not in expedient ideological fairytales, but in the facts as far as they can be established, however inconvenient they may be to any ideological preconceptions.

As a descriptive term for what in reality are widely diverse ideologies, ‘Wahhabism’ is by no means a description that does justice to the ideology of Daesh or indeed Saudi Arabia. It is a word that within the Sunni Islamic world is applied almost whol-
ly in a derogatory manner to any kind of ultra-conservative form of Islam, with its proponents within Saudi Arabia and abroad usually self-identifying as Salafiyyah or Muwahhid (those who proclaim the oneness of Allah). A more adequate term for this ideology is ‘Salafi Jihadism’, with Wahhabism being one particular subset.

If we wish truly to understand Daesh and its relationship to the Syrian revolution it is imperative that we attempt to fully elucidate its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and also that we explore why this conspiracy narrative has taken root and establish the precise nature of its political value. By scrutinizing the continuity between Saudi Arabia and Daesh we begin to see their irreconcilable antagonisms.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was an 18th Islamic preacher and scholar from the Najd region of modern Saudi Arabia, whose writings and methodology for interpreting sharia and relating to Islam gave rise to a particular trend within the wider Salafi movement. Like other Salafist trends it was a revivalist movement that attempted to essentialise and fetishise the alleged Islamic praxis of the first Muslims (as-Salafiyyah) and recreate them in modern times.

Al-Wahhab meant this quite literally—he believed in instituting a social and political order recreating his interpretation of the life of Muslims in the 7th. He didn’t see this as the beginning of a new movement within Islam, but instead a return to the original Islam practiced by the Prophet. In this respect, every ‘innovation’ in Islam (bid’ah, synonymous with ‘heresy’ to most ultra-conservative variants of Salafism) that occurred after the life of Muhammad and the earliest Muslims is considered a corruption of this supposedly authentic Islam. This is the practice of takfir—declaring other Muslims to be unbelievers.

Here we can see the beginnings of the kind of ideology espoused and practiced by Daesh. There is little doubt that this is the root of the social and political order of both Saudi Arabia and the state established by Daesh. Indeed, the continuity does not end there. As with Daesh, and unlike almost every other Salafi scholar, thinker or movement, al-Wahhab was infamously able to put his theory into practice by allying with the powerful Al-Saud clan, which had only recently won control of Najd and
a significant part of the Arabian peninsula; thus birthing the Emirate of Diriyah (Imarat Diriyah), also known as the ‘First Saudi State’.

The raison d'etre of this entity was not only to establish political control over the entire Arabian Peninsula but also to cleanse it of all that was considered to be bid‘ah and shirk (loosely translates as polytheism). This would mean a war of annihilation to be waged against those that it considered as kuffar (unbelievers) or rafidah, such as all non-Muslims and those belonging to any of the Shia sects of Islam, but also Sufis and any Sunnis who merely opposed Al-Saud and Al-Wahhab’s new fascistic, theocratic revivalist order. Like Daesh, the early Saudi-Wahhabi movement had a taste for brutally grand gestures mixed with materialistic and strategic pragmatism. Once again, Iraq was the target. In 1801 the Wahhabis sacked the Shia holy city of Karbala, an act that was superficially simply the Imarat practicing takfīr on the epicentre of what they considered to be the grand heresy of Shi‘ism in the Arab world. But this ideological exterminatory zeal was just one small part of the motivation—within the walls of Karbala there was also a vast treasure. After all, even devotion to the oneness of Allah alone did not put food on the table, so to speak, and the Imarat had an entire state to maintain. J.B. Rosseau described this mixture of ideologically motivated terror and the materially motivated expansionism in viciously vivid detail in his eyewitness account contained in Description du Pachalik du Baghdad Suivie d’une Notice Historique sur les Wahabis:

We have recently seen a horrible example of the Wahhabis’ cruel fanaticism in the terrible fate of the mosque of Imam Husayn. Incredible wealth was known to have accumulated in that town... For centuries, the mosque of Imam Husayn was known to have received donations of silver, gold, jewels, a great amount of rarities... Tamerlane even spared that place. Everybody knew that the most part of the rich spoils that Nadir Shah had brought back from his Indian campaign had been transferred to the mosques of Imam Husayn and Imam Ali together with his own wealth. Now, the enormous wealth that has accumulated in the former has been exciting the Wahhabis’ avidity for some time. They have been continuously dreaming of looting that town [Karbala] and were so sure of success that their creditors fixed
the debt payment to the happy day when their hopes would come true.

That day came at last. 12,000 Wahhabis suddenly attacked the mosque of Imam Husayn. After seizing more spoils than they had ever seized after their greatest victories, they put everything to fire and sword... The elderly, women, and children—everybody died by the barbarians’ sword. Besides, it is said that whenever they saw a pregnant woman, they disembowelled her and left the foetus on the mother’s bleeding corpse. Their cruelty could not be satisfied, they did not cease their murders and blood flowed like water. As a result of the bloody catastrophe, more than 4,000 people perished. The Wahhabis carried off their plunder on the backs of 4,000 camels. After the plunder and murders they destroyed the Imam’s shrine and converted it into a trench of abomination and blood. They inflicted the greatest damage on the minarets and the domes, believing those structures were made of gold bricks.²

Instead of 4,000 camels, today we see Daesh’s seemingly endless convoys of Toyota pick up trucks and the vast quantities of US-provided loot they managed to capture from the so-called ‘Iraqi Army’ after seizing Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city and the Northern hub for receiving US military aid to govern the ‘Sunni’ provinces of the country.

We see Daesh’s relatively vast oil reserves and its ability to both tear up the settled order, i.e. the physical and geographical boundaries between nation states, while maintaining some form of the economic and social order. We see its pragmatism when it comes to selling oil to the Assad regime and its utilisation of the regional black market to sustain itself. The point is that there is no doubt there is continuity between the founding of the Wahhabi movement in state form and the founding of Daesh’s so-called Khilafah, but while this is itself significant, it is perhaps not for the reasons one might suppose. Saudi Arabia after the First Saudi State—which interestingly, was only destroyed when other Sunni Islamic forces turned against it, namely the Ottoman Empire led by Muhammad Ali’s Egyptian Eyalet (administrative province)—and then in its other incarnations, settled within national boundaries with no expansionist ambitions.

². ballandalus.wordpress.com/2014/08/02/the-wahhabi-sack-of-karbala-1802-a-d/
While Saudi Arabia has retained its Wahhabist core, with Al ash-Sheikh (literally: ‘House of the Sheikh’), which is the name for the descendents of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab controlling the Saudi ulama (ruling religious body), its earlier jihadist incarnation and its quest to cleanse the so-called Islamic lands of all deemed to be un-Islamic, have been repressed to the point of extinction. Both Saudi Arabia and Daesh’s Khilafah share similar state apparatuses, such as a religious police force, the Mutaween in Saudi and the Hisbah in the Khilafah, which are both tasked with enforcing religious law on an inter-personal basis, whether it is ensuring that women maintain a strict dress code or punishing people for smoking. Moreover, both Saudi and Daesh take similar views on what constitutes capital offences and similar methods of execution, with both employing beheading and crucification as forms of capital punishment and corporal punishment (all with a basis in the same fiqh).

The very fact of continuity between Saudi Arabia and Daesh is the source of the mutual antagonisms between the two. It is due to the fact that these entities share the same ideological DNA that they present a mutual threat to one another as they compete to hegemonise the wider Salafi movement, and in terms of intra-Salafi religious battles relating to fiqh (understanding and interpretation) and wider theological questions. But as an insurgent offensive movement, Daesh (that far from being bankrolled by the Saudi’s) poses a very real, combustible threat to the Saudi state.

So the similarities between Daesh and Saudi are more than superficial, as I have suggested above. But while they share the same ideological roots, the deep antagonism we referred to can be observed at a theological and political level too. Most obviously Daesh is a self-declared Khilafah of Dar al-Islam: it has declared itself not merely to be an Islamic State, but rather the Islamic State. Indeed, when the Khilafah was first declared, after the fall of Mosul, spokesman Abu Mohamed al-Adnani emphasised the fact that Daesh-leader and self-declared Khalifa Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was “the leader of Muslims everywhere” and that “the Islamic State decided to establish an Islamic caliphate and to designate a caliph for the state of the Muslims”.

ing ‘you are either with us or against us’—you are either a true Muslim who will come and fight for the Khilafah, or you are an unbeliever and enemy of Islam.

In a document entitled This is the Promise of Allah, released at the time of the declaration of the Khilafah, Daesh took aim at all the rulers of the Muslim world:

We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilāfah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalīfah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah’s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.4

Daesh do not wish to co-exist with any form of government in any Muslim-majority state, including Saudi Arabia. In fact, Daesh’s entire raison d’etre is to overthrow what they see as the unrighteous governmental form of the Saudi state, with its king presiding over rule by the ulama. In Daesh’s worldview, the khalīfa is the religious, social and political leader of all Muslims, and the idea of Muslims being ruled by a king who has no religious authority is bid’ah. This view stems from their politically charged interpretation of the concept of taghut (which roughly means a ruler who idolatrously crosses boundaries by placing himself before God). In a training camp manual called Muqarrar fi al-Tawhid (‘Course in Monotheism’) used by Daesh to indoctrinate its recruits, it explains this application of taghut:

The Imam Ibn al-Qayyim (may God have mercy on him) said: “And taghut is all by which man exceeds his boundary from worship, following and obedience. So taghut is everyone to whom they appeal besides God and His Messenger (SAWS), or whom they worship without God, or whom they follow without enlightenment from God, or whom they obey in what they do not know that it is obedience to God. So these are the tawâghīb of the world: when you consider them and consider the throngs of the people with them, you see that most of them have been turned from worship of God to worship of taghut, from appeal to God and His Messenger (SAWS) to

4. ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf
appeal to *taghut*, and from obeying Him and following His Messenger (SAWS) to *taghut* and following it”.

So Daesh view Al-Saud as *tawagheet* or unjust rulers who deflect Muslims from practicing Sharia to obeying man-made laws. Daesh also consider the Saudi *ulama*, the Wahhabi religious establishment, to be little more than agents of this anti-Islamic system and thus reject their religious rulings, despite the superficial ideological continuity and common historical roots. Daesh believe the very idea of Muslims adhering to a national identity to be a grave consequence of *taghut*, or, as Abu Umar al-Baghdadi (the leader of Daesh after Zarqawi’s death and before that of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) put it, “we are fighting not for any patriotism but rather God’s word to be most high”.

While Saudi Arabia is a settled nation-state with definite borders, Daesh is expressly anti-national. To put it another way, Saudi Arabia settled for ‘theocracy in one country’, while an entity like Daesh seeks to fulfil al-Wahhab’s mission to constitute a purified worldwide *Khilafah*. Indeed, in 2012, during Daesh’s re-emergence via the chaos of Syria, the self-declared *Khalifa* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic State “does not recognise synthetic borders nor any citizenship beside Islam”.

In Jul 2014, just following Daesh’s seizure of Mosul, a leading Daesh member said via social media that “if Allah wills, we will kill those who worship stones in Mecca and destroy the Kaaba… people go to Mecca to touch the stones, not for Allah”. This is consistent with the long-held obsession of the most extreme Salafi Jihadists to destroy the Kaaba stone in Mecca whose presence in the holy city they see as being gravely idolatrous and a shameful throw-back to pre-Islamic Arabian paganism. But it was also more as, after Daesh’s blitzkrieg of northern Iraq, it came to control much of the al-Anbar province to the West bordering Saudi Arabia’s Northern Border governorate. Soon Daesh were making noises about invading the Kingdom, specifically targeting the regional capital of Arar, which lies right on the Iraqi border.

5. aymennjawad.org/17633/islamic-state-training-camp-textbook-course-in
6. brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf
7. huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/01/isis-destroy-kaaba-mecca_n_5547635.html
In fact, in November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recorded an audio message calling for an attack on Saudi Arabia, appealing to the “sons of al-Haramayn” (‘al-Haramayn’ is a reference to ‘The Two Sanctuaries’ situated in Saudi Arabia—the two holiest mosques in the Islamic world in Mecca and Medina) to “draw your swords and divorce life, because there should be no sanctuary for the Saloul”.8 ‘Saloul’ is a derogatory name for the Saudi royal family, common among Salafi Jihadists, and to reinforce how much Daesh sees them as the primary antagonists to the Khilafah and the advance of pure Islam, Baghdadi describes Saudi Arabia in his statement as being the place where “the serpent’s head and the stronghold of the disease” dwell.9 The capture of The Two Sanctuaries and the destruction of Al-Saud would be the crowning glory of Daesh’s Khilafah.

The Saudi regime took the threats seriously. Not only were they among the first nations to pledge their military resources to the US-led 60 nation coalition that is currently bombing Daesh targets in Iraq and Syria, but they also began the construction of a 600-mile long ‘great wall’ along the border with Iraq in an attempt to fortify themselves against a potential Daesh onslaught and positioned a defensive military force of 30,000 soldiers, mostly from Egypt and Pakistan, along the border.10

The Saudi’s were wise to take these precautions. Contrary to the conspiracy theories of Saudi support for Daesh—and ignored by the Western media—is the fact Daesh is currently waging a low-level but determined war against Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there is little doubt that one of the main calculations of the US intervention against Daesh was not just the threat to the territorial integrity of the Iraqi central government, but that it also had a potential launch pad for action against its great nemesis and key US ally Saudi Arabia. The idea of Daesh possibly launching serious military attacks on the world’s largest oil supplier is terrifying in terms of the havoc it could create in the world market.

Thus far Daesh’s war on Saudi has been waged on two different levels. The first level was attacks from Daesh occupied positions in Iraq. These have included several long-range mortar

9. Ibid.
10. thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/iraq/article4164627.
attacks against Arar and other civilian areas that had little impact. Yet despite coalition air strikes and the ground assaults by the US and Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaaby militia forces, Daesh’s capacity for attacking the Kingdom has been growing. In January 2015 Daesh fighters attacked the Suweif border post, located a mere 25 miles from the city of Arar, killing three Saudi border patrol soldiers, including a General. Later in the same month, dozens of Daesh fighters were reported to have crossed over from Iraq to infiltrate the Saudi town of Rafah.

The second level of Daesh’s attempted war on Saudi is through utilising homegrown preexisting jihadi groups that have given bay’ah (an oath of allegiance) to Daesh, as well as supporter cells and so-called ‘lone wolf’ sympathisers. This strategy serves to destabilise Saudi from within, mostly by targeting the Shia minority, with the overall goal of sparking a sectarian war, thus creating the chaos on which Daesh thrive, while also attempting to fulfil the original Wahhabist goal of driving Shia out of Dar al-Islam.

This reflects the baleful aspect of the continuity between Daesh and Saudi Arabia and underlines their antagonism. It is precisely because Saudi Arabia contains a significant proportion of so-called Wahhabis who share ideological roots with Daesh that the latter could establish itself as a serious destabilising force within the country. And this is precisely what Daesh has attempted to do since their establishment of the Khilafah.

Since June 2014, two different Daesh franchises have been created within Saudi Arabia’s borders, namely Wilayat al-Najd (the Province of Najd, referring to the central-north area of the country) and Wilayat al-Hejaz (referring to the western area of the country), comprised mostly of former al-Qaeda militants and new recruits to the cause. The first attack by these forces occurred on 22 May 2015 on the Shia Mosque of Imam Ali in the village of al-Qadeeh in the Saudi eastern province of Qatif. Following the attack, in which a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device during prayers, killing 21 people and wounding more than 90, Wilayat al-Najd released a statement saying

11. levantinegroup.com/#!ISIS%E2%80%99s-Wilayat-Najd-shatters-GCC%E2%80%99s-ironclad-security-perceptions/c21xo/55e066d50cf29a3653ba898c
12. jihadintel.meforum.org/175/islamic-state-claims-suicide-bombing-in-new
that it would not rest until Shia were expelled from the Arabian peninsula.

This was swiftly followed on May 29, when a suicide bomber, disguised as a woman and from Daesh’s Wilayat al-Najd, killed four people in a mosque in Dammam, the capital of Saudi’s Eastern Province. In a boastful statement released shortly after the attack, Daesh claimed the attack was “a martyrdom operation [targeting] a shrine of the mushrikun\(^{13}\), which were planted by the rafidah [rejectors] in the Sunni areas to spread their message”, carried out by “a jealous brother, a soldier of the Khilafah”, and “God helped him to reach his target during a meeting of these unclean people, despite the protections of the zealots of Al-Salul\(^{14}\)… God has cursed them… we ask all our Sunni brothers to liberate the land of the Holy Shrines from them”.

In this statement, Daesh strategy was once again laid bare. While the cleansing of Shia from what they see as Sunni heartlands is an end in itself for Daesh, the very presence of Shia in Saudi Arabia is used as a propaganda weapon to delegitimize Al-Saud, or the “head of the snake and stronghold of the disease”, as al-Baghdadi called them, in the hearts and minds of those inclined to Salafism. The statement claimed the attack in Dammam would have been far more deadly if not for the fact that Saudi policemen stopped the bomber from entering the packed mosque, and portrayed Saudi as the protectors of the Shia. In Saudi Arabia (unsurprisingly far from being a bastion of inter-sect tolerance and harmony), one of Daesh’s primary goals is to undermine whatever fragile coexistence there is between Sunnis and Shia, while portraying Al-Saud as the protectors of heretics and thus heretics themselves. Only Daesh are the real protectors of true Islam.

Indeed, in a statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi following Saudi Arabia’s intervention against primarily Ansar Allah (the Houthis) in Yemen, the Daesh leader plays on the portrayal of Al-Saud as being slaves of the enemies of Islam and disinterested in the plight of Muslims:

\[
\text{O Muslims, the apostate tyrannical rulers who rule your lands in the lands of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina)... are the allies of the Jews and Crusaders. Rather, they are their slaves, servants, and guard dogs, and nothing else.}
\]

13. Polytheists—used by Salafi jihadists to mean Shia.
The armies that they prepare and arm and which the Jews and Crusaders train are only to crush you, weaken you, enslave you to the Jews and Crusaders, turn you away from your religion and the path of Allah, plunder the goods of your lands, and rob you of your wealth...

Where is the support of Āl Salūl and their allies for a million of the weak Muslims who are all without exception being exterminated in Burma? Where is their chivalry towards the barrel bombs of the Nusayriyyah¹⁵ and their cannons, which demolish the Muslims’ homes upon the heads of their dwellers from amongst the women, the children, and the weak in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and elsewhere. Where is the jealousy of the Arabian Peninsula’s rulers towards the noble women who are raped daily in Shām, Iraq, and the various lands of the Muslims? Where is the relief of the rulers of Mecca and Medina for the Muslims in China and the Muslims in India against whom the Hindus commit the worst of crimes daily, including murder, burning, rape, severing of joints, looting, plundering, and imprisonment? Where is their relief for them in Indonesia, the Caucasus, Africa, Khorasan [Iran], and everywhere else? The Arabian Peninsula’s rulers have been exposed and disgraced and have lost their supposed ‘legitimacy.’ Their treachery has become clear even to the laymen of the Muslims. And their reality thereby became apparent. So their masters from amongst the Jews and Crusaders had no more use for them. And so their masters began to replace them with the Safawī [Iranians] Rāfidah and the Kurdish atheists.

When Āl Salūl realized their masters’ abandonment of them, their disposal of them like tattered shoes, and their replacement of them, they launched their supposed war against the Rāfidah of Yemen. And it is not a storm of resolve, rather it is the kick of a dying person, by Allah’s permission, as he struggles during his last breaths.

Āl Salūl, the slaves of the Crusaders and allies of the Jews, do not wish that any good should be sent down to the Muslims from their Lord. They remained for decades not caring about the tragedies of the Muslims all over the world generally, and in Palestine particularly. Thereafter, they remained for years allied with the Rāfidah of Iraq in a war against Ahlus-Sunnah (the

¹⁵. Derogatory name for Alawites.
Sunnis). Thereafter, they remained observing the barrel bombs of death and destruction in Shām for years, enjoying and taking delight in the scenes of Muslims being killed, imprisoned, slaughtered, and burned, and their honor raped, their wealth plundered, and their homes destroyed, all at the hands of the Nusayriyyah.

Today they claim to defend Ahlus-Sunnah in Yemen against the Rāfidah! Rather, they have lied, failed, and lost. Their war is nothing but an attempt to prove themselves once again to their masters from amongst the Jews and Crusaders. It is nothing but a desperate attempt to turn the Muslims away from the Islamic State whose voice is high everywhere and whose reality has become clear to all the Muslims and therefore the Muslims began to gradually rally around it. Their storm is nothing but a storm of delusion after the fire of the Rāfidah scorched their thrones and after the Rāfidah’s march reached the people of the Arabian Peninsula, a matter that will lead thereafter to the Muslim public in the Arabian Peninsula rallying around the Islamic State since it defends them against the Rāfidah. This is what frightens Āl Salūl and the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula and makes their thrones tremble.

Here we see Daesh’s will to unseat Saudi Arabia as the pretender to the throne of the vanguard and protector of Sunni Islam laid bare. As with the Wahhabist call, Daesh seek to expose Al-Saud as being “slaves, servants and guard dogs” of the “Jews and Crusaders”, to overthrow them, and for Muslims in the territories of Saudi Arabia to dedicate themselves to the Islamic State project instead. It lists instances of persecution of Sunni Muslims, from the sectarian war in Syria to the persecution of the Muslim minorities in China and Burma, contrasting it with Saudi Arabia’s inaction in these areas. The reasons for this inaction may seem obvious to those outside of the broad Salafi milieu, but the level of historical-ideological continuity that does exist between Saudi Arabia and Daesh once again determines the political value of this apparent hypocrisy.

Far from Saudi Arabia in any sense supporting Daesh materially or ideologically, these two entities’ mutual antagonism—albeit within the milieu of Wahhabism—means one represents the other’s antithesis. For Saudi Arabia, Daesh represents its historical roots renewed—itself an indictment
of Saudi’s Wahhabist credentials—while for Daesh, Saudi represents a form of Wahhabism that eschews Daesh’s conduct expressed in the obligatory Islamic praxis supposedly justified by the body of theological work referred to as ‘Wahhabism’. Therefore it would have been strategic short sightedness, to put it mildly, for Saudi to have funded this entity in any capacity.

One of the remarkable aspects of the conspiratorial narratives implicating Saudi Arabia in funding Daesh is that while they scrabble around desperately looking for any old scrap of evidence to bolster their belief these critics forgo looking at the kind of groups Saudi Arabia has definitely funded in Syria. The majority of the Syrian rebel groups funded by Saudi Arabia are secular nationalist in character.

Saudi Arabia has always had a pragmatic approach to foreign policy determined more by the pursuit of their material and political interests as opposed to the piety of the recipients of its support. One example of this realpolitik is Saudi’s support for the allegedly ‘secular’ counterrevolutionary regime of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Egypt over the nominally Islamist but democratically elected presidency of Mohamed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia faces a host of demographic problems relating to the configuration of the state, as only 22 percent of the country adheres to the official state religion of Wahhabism, while the majority are non-Wahhabi Sunnis of the Hanbali madhab (school of thought), with a minority of Twlever Shiites and Ismailis. So Saudi Arabia has been extremely hostile to any foreign or external forces that could rally a non-Wahhabi majority. After Egypt’s democratic revolution on January 25th, and the subsequent victory of democratic Islamic forces in the elections (the Arab world’s largest and arguably most influential country), the Saudi’s were hostile and they quickly backed the forces of counter revolution and pledged billions for Al Sisi’s triumphant tyranny. Al-Saud are notorious for their cold, brutal instinct for self-preservation and in Egypt’s nascent but fragile revolutionary democracy they saw their potential demise and thus did whatever they could to support those who would crush this democracy.

This is also true of any force appealing to Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. During Abdullah’s reign the Saudi’s preferred to aid secular nationalist forces in Syria that did not contain Muslim
Brotherhood affiliated groups while Qatar armed those forces with Brotherhood affiliates. In the early stages of the conflict, Saudi’s main interlocutor on the ground in Turkey was the Lebanese politician Okab Sakr (a member of the secular nationalist Future Movement and another force close to Saudi Arabia), who was responsible for making sure the consignments of mostly ammunition and light weaponry were distributed to what would be described as ‘moderate’ Free Syrian Army groups that were not affiliated with the Brotherhood.

One of the forces that received generous Saudi funding was the secular nationalist FSA-affiliate Liwa Shuhada Suriya (Syrian Martyrs’ Brigade) led by Jamal Maarouf. Far from Saudi’s funding Daesh when the FSA and Qatar and the Turkish funded Islamic Front launched an offensive against Daesh it was led by a FSA coalition called the Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front led by Jamal Maarouf. The weapons they used against Daesh on the frontlines were paid for by Saudi Arabia.

The only hard line Salafist group that Saudi has funded is Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam) which was a merger of several different Salafi forces initiated by Saudi’s to attempt to deflect both Syrian and foreign Salafi recruits away from the growing threat of Jabhat an-Nusra (which at that time was still what Daesh called itself in Syria before its split). The reason for this was that Jabhat an-Nusra, as with all al-Qaeda ‘franchises’, espouses a virulent and violent anti-Saudi theology and politics.

It took the death of King Abdullah and the ascension to the Saudi throne of King Salman who took an even more pragmatic, self interested approach to regional affairs than his predecessor, for Saudi Arabia to effectively end its persecution of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups. The new calculation reflected the fact many Saudi citizens supported President Morsi and the plight of the brutally repressed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This was combined with Iran’s growing hegemony in Syria and Iraq and, most importantly, the seizure of power next door in Yemen by the Iranian aligned (though this ought not to be overstated) Shia (Zaidi) Islamist Ansar Allah. Saudi Arabia needed allies with roots among the Sunni populations of neighbouring countries. This meant ecumenicalism with the Brotherhood. King Salman brought the Brotherhood-aligned Al-Islah movement in Yemen, the most popular force among Yemeni
Sunnis but ludicrously denounced as a ‘terrorist’ group under Abdullah into the fold.

In Syria King Salman’s new policy meant providing aid for coalitions that involved Brotherhood-aligned or affiliated groups like Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), joint operations in Idlib, which along with forces like the Islamist Ahrar ash-Sham (Free Men of the Levant) and Free Syrian Army brigades also contains the Brotherhood affiliate Faylaq ash Sham (Sham Legion). Not only was it the Saudi provisioned arms that contributed to Jaish al-Fatah’s liberation of Idlib from the Assad regime and the foreign occupation forces of Iran and Hezbollah, but it was Saudi Arabia who provided the precious TOW anti-tank weapons that allowed these forces to massacre Assad’s Russian tanks during the latter’s attempted offensive in Homs and Hama in coordination with Russian air strikes against Jaish al-Fatah. These are the realities of Saudi’s funding of the Syrian revolution—you would think those who claimed to belong to the left would rejoice the rebels had some support against the Assad regime and the massive intervention on Assad’s behalf from Iran and Russia. But the conspiracy narrative of Saudi’s funding Daesh has never been about a realistic assessment of events in Syria. Indeed this narrative has been about obscuring what is happening for ideological purposes.

One might ask why it matters if people believe that Saudi Arabia funds Daesh, but within the context of the Syrian revolution, it matters a great deal. Since the very beginning of the conflict, the Assad regime and its allies, particularly Iran and its proxy force in Hezbollah, have attempted to portray the revolution through all its stages, from civil uprising to revolutionary war, as a Saudi-Wahhabi plot against the Assad regime. This is by no means a piece of harmlessly inane propaganda, but rather a means of justifying sectarian slaughter and ethnic cleansing against Syria’s Sunni-majority.

If those who rise up against the Assad dynasty can be portrayed as Salafi jihadist ‘terrorists’, then every brutal act committed against them, and the Sunni civilian population is justifiable in the eyes of the regime, its allies and their supporters. In that sense, it is not just a counterrevolutionary narrative but also one that justifies mass murder and ethnic cleansing. It allows the Assad regime to be portrayed as a victim of a grand conspiracy (not just involving Saudi Arabia, but also the CIA, British intelligence
and Mossad, or the ‘crusaders and Jews’ as Daesh would have it), while portraying those resisting it as uncompromising ‘Islamofascists’ who wish to drag Syria into some sort of theocratic nightmare. As with all conspiracy theories, there is no compromise.

For the Assad regime and its supporters, the rise of Daesh has to be obscured by conspiracy theory and ideological obfuscation because the most immediate cause of its rise is the Assad regime’s continued survival and its near genocidal, sectarian war against the Syrian population. The Assad regime has to portray itself as the only legitimate antagonist to Daesh in Syria, so that it and its allies, particularly Iran and Russia (not to mention their obedient mouthpieces in the media and among the political class), have gone out of their way to obfuscate the causes of Daesh. This entails the mindless shifting of blame onto Daesh’s non-existent relationship with Saudi Arabia (and any other force that falls outside the camp of the ‘Axis of Resistance’), incidentally reinforcing the aforementioned genocide-justifying narrative. This is the narrative used by the Russian Federation in its self proclaimed crusade against Daesh, whose airstrikes actually amount to attacks upon the very rebel forces fighting Daesh and, primarily and critically, the Assad regime. When Russian warplanes strike hospitals or market places in Free Syria (that are Daesh free), indiscriminately killing civilians, this narrative is employed to obscure the facts and justify the killing. When regime death squads, the Iranian invasion force and its assembled Shia jihadists are supplemented by Russian air strikes and artillery units to launch offensives against the Syrian revolutionaries, this is the narrative that blurs the picture with blood.

One of the most bizarre elements of the conspiracy theories about Daesh’s rise is that they skate over much of what should be more politically interesting to anti-imperialists, the circumstances of Daesh’s initial rise in Iraq. There’s no doubt that the single most important element in the rise of Daesh was the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. There is a tendency among many commentators especially those on the right of the political spectrum to imagine that the rise of entities like Daesh is inevitable in the Arabo-Islamic world (though Assad’s supporters and the Syrian revolution’s antagonists on the left have increasingly accepted this right wing logic).
This argument is that the alternative to order (basically meaning a strong authoritarian state) is different degrees of jihadi-inspired chaos. There is a kernel of truth in this argument, given that the destruction of order, even of a brutal and unjust kind, will almost certainly lead to ‘chaos’ as state apparatuses and institutions crumble. But what this argument omits is that it is precisely through such order that the ‘chaos’ is created. Order based on brutality and corruption arranges its own funeral. In its contempt for the borders of the Middle East, (“we are not the sons of Sykes-Picot,” said leading member of Daesh, Abu Hamza, “we are the sons of the Prophet”), Daesh at once mirrors, cultivates but finally distorts the generalised contempt for a regional order that is overwhelmingly based historically and presently on contempt for liberty, progress and human life.

It is no surprise then that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the progenitor of what would become Daesh, finally found his calling, converting (or transferring) from gangsterism to Salafi jihadism, in a Jordanian dungeon. After fighting as part of the mujahideen during the war against the USSR in Afghanistan, Zarqawi was imprisoned by Jordanian authorities and amidst the daily torture and beatings cemented his Salafi jihadi ideology, forming a core group of zealously loyal followers.16 Upon his release, and following the US invasion of Afghanistan and dawning of the ‘war on terror’ in 2002, Zarqawi and his followers sniffed an opportunity and moved from Jordan into Iraqi Kurdistan, where they founded the earliest form of Daesh, named Jamaat wa-Tawhid al-Jihad (the Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad). 17

A year after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi gave bay’ah (oath of allegiance) to Osama Bin Laden and thus birthed al-Qaeda in Iraq despite holding a far harsher, more brutal Salafi jihadi worldview than al-Qaeda, especially when it came to the practice of takfir.18 The relationship between Zarqawi and Bin Laden was, despite the broad ideological convergence, more pragmatic than anything else. After al-Qaeda had established itself as the leading Salafi jihadist force in the entire jihadi movement, culminating in the brutally unprecedented spectacle of the 9/11

---

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
attacks, use of the al-Qaeda brand name was a sure fire way to attract the maximum amount of foreign and, to a lesser degree in Iraq, local jihadis. This was at the root of the calculation behind Zarqawi’s bay’ah to Bin Laden, while for Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, this relationship allowed his group to claim it was on the frontline against the US in Iraq.

In reality, Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership had zero operational control over the group. Zarqawi’s strategic focus was on targeting non-Sunni religious groups, particularly Shia, rather than the US-led coalition occupation forces, with the hope of, like Daesh’s strategy towards Muslim countries to this day, of inciting a sectarian civil war that would, in his own words, “awaken these inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans”.20

The al-Qaeda leadership was fundamentally opposed to this strategy. They calculated it would alienate al-Qaeda from both the general resistance to US occupation and local populations. Moreover, al-Qaeda’s then second in command and now leader Ayman al-Zawahiri argued that the targeting of Shia was wrong and that they were not kuffar who could be murdered with impunity, but that they were merely theologically ignorant. This was in contrast to Zarqawi’s insistence that Shia, were “a dagger that stabbed Islam and Muslims in the heart” and his citing of various bogus historical instances of alleged Shia ‘treachery’ and collaboration with enemies of Islam.21 In other words, any future Khilafah (at this stage Zarqawi was talking of Iraq), that arose from the ‘chaos’ would be free from Shia.

It is also true that Zarqawi was equally ruthless to the Sunnis who crossed or disobeyed him. This further alienated the al-Qaeda leadership, who were dismayed at the beheadings of Sunni tribal leaders who refused to fight with him and the effects this had on relations between the local populace and the jihadis. Zarqawi saw brutality as necessary in projecting strength and striking fear into the local population, all the better to rule them. This legacy has been inherited by Daesh. The largest single massacre carried out by Daesh anywhere in the world was not of Shia, Yazidis or Christians but rather as many as 900

19. Another derogatory term for Shia.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
of the Sunni ash-Shuaytat tribe in Deir ez-Zor in Syria. Men, women and children were shot, blown up, crucified and beheaded simply because they would not give up their lands to Daesh and acquiesce to their tyrannical rule.

These disagreements were early signs of the sort of fault lines that would widen into a chasm between Daesh and al-Qaeda while Zarqawi’s brutal tactics of murdering civilians and targeting minorities came to typify Daesh’s praxis. We also see in Zarqawi’s early strategy an understanding of the recruitment potential of his brand of fascism that appealed to Sunni identity politics and sectarian war by aggrandizing the imminent threat of ‘annihilating death’ to the Sunni population. This has given Daesh real impetus in the last four years in Iraq and Syria especially against the backdrop of Assad’s Iranian backed and supplemented near genocidal sectarian war and the sectarian injustices of the Iraqi regime. Daesh literally thrives on sectarian slaughter and war, ignoring and engendering it in order to focus on violently hegemonising Sunni Islam, the better to become its absolute rulers. As Abu Umar al-Baghdadi put it, “the rulers of Muslim lands are traitors, sinners, liars, deceivers and criminals...fighting them is of greater necessity than fighting the occupying crusaders”.

Indeed, bearing in mind that Daesh’s rise represents genuine currents within Islam as much as it owes to the environment of authoritarian brutality, often sponsored and encouraged by powerful Western nations, imperialism’s actual role in indirectly aiding the formation of Daesh ought to be of more political interest than the plethora of half baked conspiracy theories relating its rise to funding by the US or its regional allies. It has been said by some that Daesh simply would not exist if it were not for the US overthrowing Saddam Hussein and equally it would not still exist if not for the Syrian people rising against the dynastic Assad regime. However these arguments are not simply over-simplifications but also the product of a deeply conservative mindset.

The real formulation should be that Daesh would not exist in its current form if not for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which involved the reckless dismantling of the entire state, all the better to let private contractors swoop in to ‘reassemble’ it on billion dollar contracts. Or if, during the occupation, the US hadn’t deliberately fomented and strengthened sectarianism in order to divide and conquer the Iraqi national resistance, which had threatened to bridge the Shia-Sunni divide and politically
unite the country—something that has been unthinkable in Iraq since the British Empire installed the Sunni Hashemite dynasty in a Shia-majority country.22

The US knew that fostering sectarianism and allowing what I call functional disunity to flourish could best preserve its interests. This is how the US has proceeded since (with occasional flashes of self realisation), and this is a major reason why Daesh has been able to become the force it is today (and the impact of the Syrian war). There is a mistaken tendency to think that Empire is always prescient but history shows us that more often than not that Empire is desperately single minded, unwilling to adapt and relentless in pursuing its interests. So the US currently provides arms and air support for al-Hashd ash-Shaaby (Peoples Mobilisation Forces), a coalition of sectarian Shia jihadist militias many of them primarily allied to the Supreme Leader of Iran (including their main commander and current Iraqi interior minister Muhammad al-Ghabban—who is a member of the Iranian funded sectarian serial killers known as the Badr Organisation). These forces are almost perfect enemies for Daesh because their reprisal attacks on Sunni civilians—beheadings, Lynchings, abductions, mass slaughter, ethnic cleansing—create a fear of ‘annihilating death’ among Sunni civilians and reinforces Daesh’s fascist logic. This is the only response imperialism can muster—sectarianism and division. It’s precisely this response that lends Daesh a prominence beyond mere material support.

We have been here before. At the height of Iraq’s sectarian war, al-Qaeda in Iraq (as Zarqawi predicted with the activity of brutal Shia militias), would grow themselves and become entrenched in Sunni communities by posing as protectors against a Shia onslaught. Indeed, it was in 2006 that they announced the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council, a prelude to some sort of state formation, and then finally began talking of the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’.23

The US then began to recognise the dangers inherent in their initial efforts to split the Iraqi resistance to the occupation that had led to the unleashing of a monster in the form of AQI, and

22. dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/sectarian-entrepreneurs-how-the-u-s-broke-iraq
23. longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/10/the_rump_islamic_emi.php
that the US Army, as a foreign occupation force, could never fully penetrate or win over the Sunni communities in Iraq. The US also realised that the advance of sectarian Shia militias, which, like the takfiris, were committing atrocities against Sunnis (sometimes with and sometimes without government consent), were allowing al-Qaeda to become entrenched within these communities.

So the US Army formed an alliance with non-takfiri and non-sectarian Sunni militias, initially mostly drawn from anti-US tribal forces and other elements of the Sunni resistance, on the basis militias would lay down their arms against the US and would focus on attacking the intransigently sectarian al-Qaeda affiliated forces. In return these Sunni militias would receive arms, training and salaries from the US Army. These forces were known primarily as Harakat al-Sahwa (Sahwat) and they succeeded in pushing al-Qaeda out of Sunni areas and, by 2009, to weaken them to the point of practical defeat.

So how then did Iraq come to find itself in the position of having lost most of the Northern and Western areas of the country to this force that had been so severely limited and weakened by the Sahwa militias?

The government of Nouri al-Maliki, of the Shia Islamist Islamic Dawa Party, did not represent a government of all Iraqis as it claimed, but rather something akin to a government of the conquerors over the conquered. While the US-led ‘de-Baathification’ had managed to ensure the Hussein regime would never rise again, it also became a by-word for a host of outrageous sectarian crimes against Sunnis, ranging from institutional and economic discrimination to ethnic cleansing. If Saddam Hussein had justified his savagery against Shia Iraqis on grounds they were a fifth column, then the new Iraqi Shia-dominated government were going to do the same with Sunnis.

The Iraqi government’s sectarianism has been the single most important factor allowing Daesh to maintain a presence, even

25. brookings.edu/research/testimony/2013/12/12-resurgence-al-qaeda-iraq-byman
26. newstatesman.com/international-politics/2014/08/why-there-sunni-arab-support-isis-iraq
27. musingsoniraq.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/blog-post.html
The Rise of Daesh in Syria

at low levels, in Iraq after its heavy losses to the Sahwat. Daesh thrives on sectarian polarisation and this is precisely what the US and Iranian backed Maliki government provided.

After the Sahwat had defeated al-Qaeda, the US abandoned their erstwhile allies under the illusion that they, as non-sectarian Sunni militias, would have their salaries maintained by the Maliki government until they were eventually integrated into the Iraqi security forces. Maliki had other plans. Instead of maintaining this bridge with the Sunni communities and working towards a non-sectarian and unified security apparatus, Maliki in a show of the petty, paranoid sectarianism that was characteristic of his catastrophic leadership, decided to stop paying the salaries of most of the Sahwat and further refused to integrate them into the national security apparatuses, which by this point had become little more than a hollowed out, US-armed sectarian gang.28

In a tragically ironic but significant twist of fate, while Maliki was subverting democracy by blocking the non-sectarian Iraqiyya political movement, which had won the 2010 election garnering more votes than any other political force in the country including Maliki’s own, from forming a government (a move that was criminally supported by the Obama administration) many of the Sahwat rank and file, facing a future of unemployment and sectarian discrimination, were drifting towards more extreme forces, namely Daesh.2930

The symbiotic relationship between Daesh’s fascistic appeal to Sunni identity politics and the Iraqi government’s anti-Sunni sectarianism could be seen in the fate of the protests that erupted in Iraq in 2011 as part of the wider ‘Arab spring’. These non-sectarian protests took place across the country from Kerbala to Kurdistan, with general demands for reform of Maliki’s corrupt and authoritarian regime. The Maliki regime reacted with brutality and despite attempts to appease protesters by saying that he would not run for a third term, Maliki’s regime tried to portray the protesters, whether Shia or Sunni, as part of a plot to restore Baathism.31

28. time.com/2894757/iraq-al-qaeda-awakening-council/
30. edition.cnn.com/2014/06/12/opinion/pregent-harvey-northern-iraq-collapse/?c=&page=0
31. washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/26/AR2011022601854.html
Maliki’s violent response to the protests left tens of Iraqis dead with many more injured and arrested. At first this brutality appeared to have worked but in 2012 more protests erupted this time almost entirely in Sunni areas. The immediate catalyst for the protests was a raid carried out by sectarian militia forces allied to Maliki on the home of the Sunni defence minister Rafi al-Issawi, who was a member of the non-sectarian Iraqiyya political movement, and who had been brought into the government as Maliki maneuvered to cling to power. During the raid, ten of al-Issawi’s bodyguards were arrested on charges of ‘terrorism’ and Maliki claimed the raid had resulted from an investigation by the judiciary into allegations that al-Issawi was collaborating with Sunni terrorist insurgents. The fact that al-Issawi was a member of Maliki’s own cabinet was not enough to protect him, and the move was widely seen as another power grab by Maliki using an appeal to sectarianism, thus confirming to many Sunnis that they were being locked out of the Iraqi political system.

The resulting protests began in the Sunni-dominated city of Fallujah but soon spread to other Sunni-majority areas in the Anbar province, such as Ramadi, and then erupted in Sunni areas outside of Anbar such as Mosul, Tikrit and Samarra, as well as the few remaining Sunni areas of Baghdad. The protests were overwhelmingly non-sectarian, with the main slogan being ‘Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam’ (the people demand the fall of the regime) associated with the wider ‘Arab spring’. Indeed, despite Maliki’s immediate attempt to sectarianise the protests and slander the protesters as Baathists and al-Qaeda, prominent Shia political and religious figures were declaring their support for the protests, including no less a figure than Muqtada al-Sadr, who warned Maliki that he bore “full responsibility” for the protests and that “Iraqi spring was coming”, as well as declaring that “the legitimate demands of the protesters… should be met”.

Unsurprisingly, Maliki did not heed al-Sadr’s calls. Despite half-hearted bureaucratic measures such as forming ineffectual committees that did not have any interaction with the protesters, Maliki refused to acknowledge the protesters demands choosing instead to focus on the protests as a threat to national security. The tussle went on four months with the security forces periodi-
cally injuring and killing protesters. But on 23 Apr 2013 events escalated when government forces raided a protest camp in the city of Hawija. Under the pretext of clamping down on ‘Ba-
athists’, Maliki’s security forces murdered around 39 unarmed protesters, while violently dismantling the campsite and burning tents, in scenes not dissimilar to the Al-Sisi regime’s liquidation of the sit-ins at Rabaa Square in Egypt. If there were sectarian militias present among the protesters that day in Hawija, Maliki’s forces unaccountably did not find them. In fact, Maliki’s repression merely empowered sectarian forces and reinforced a growing belief among many Sunnis that armed struggle was the only way forward against the sectarian government in Baghdad.

In a report on the situation of the Sunni minority in Iraq from August of 2013, just four months after the Hawija massacre, and before Daesh became a household name in the West, the International Crisis Group made the following observations about the consequences of Maliki’s sectarian intransigence and the aftermath of the brutality of Hawija:

This sparked a wave of violence exceeding anything witnessed for five years. Attacks against security forces and, more ominously, civilians have revived fears of a return to all-out civil strife. The Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qaeda’s local expression, is resurgent. Shiite militias have responded against Sunnis. The government’s seeming intent to address a chiefly political issue—Sunni Arab representation in Baghdad—through tougher security measures has every chance of worsening the situation.

Belittled, demonised and increasingly subject to a central government crackdown, the popular movement is slowly mutating into an armed struggle. In this respect, the absence of a unified Sunni leadership—to which Baghdad’s policies contributed and which Maliki might have perceived as an asset—has turned out to be a serious liability. In a showdown that is acquiring increasing sectarian undertones, the movement’s proponents look westward to Syria as the arena in which the fight against the Iraqi government and its Shiite allies will play out and eastward toward Iran as the source of all their ills.

Under intensifying pressure from government forces and with dwindling faith in a political solution, many Sunni Arabs have concluded their only realistic option is a violent conflict increasingly framed in confessional terms. In turn, the government con-
veniently dismisses all opposition as a sectarian insurgency that warrants ever more stringent security measures. In the absence of a dramatic shift in approach, Iraq’s fragile polity risks breaking down, a victim of the combustible mix of its long-standing flaws and growing regional tensions.33

Underlying its renascence in Iraq was the fact that Daesh had struck gold in Syria. At the very beginning of the armed uprising stage of the Syrian revolution, al-Baghdadi commissioned a group of experienced fighters from Iraq, many of them foreign jihadists, to fight on Syria’s battlefields. The group was to be called ‘Jabhat an-Nusra’ (Salvation Front—JaN), and its mission was to embed itself into the revolutionary insurgency against the Assad regime and to recruit from among Syrian jihadis. It is important to note at this stage that neither party acknowledged the relationship between the Islamic State of Iraq and JaN.34

However, following JaN’s successes derived from using its pre-existing resources from the Iraq insurgency, (its Iraqi combat experience often meant its cadres led battles against the regime, winning prestige and allowing JaN first access to battlefield loot while also ensuring JaN was able to recruit Syrian jihadis and Syrian’s who were looking for a stable fighting force against the better armed regime and its allies), al-Baghdadi decided it was time to make the relationship between the Islamic State of Iraq and JaN known. He declared that JaN was a franchise of the Islamic State of Iraq and that henceforth both the name Islamic State of Iraq and Jabhat an-Nusra would be redundant, and this group what be renamed as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa-ash-Sham). Moreover, al-Baghdadi declared that the variation of ar-rayā (the black banner) used by the group was to be the flag of the coming Khilafah. Thus Daesh was born.35

But all was not well within the organisation. The leader of Jabhat an-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani reacted to al-Baghdadi’s announcement by issuing a statement claiming that Jabhat an-Nusra was independent of Daesh, as well as restating his

34. brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf
35. Ibid.
bay’ah to al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri and declaring JaN to be the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. This caused a major schism within the group, with some JaN fighters defecting to Daesh, especially (though not solely) to its foreign jihadist contingent. This new schism led to JaN and Daesh declaring war on one another and sparking a wider conflict within the global jihadist movement about whether bay’ah should be given to al-Baghdadi or al-Zawahiri.36

So how was Daesh able to eclipse both the Syrian rebels and its al-Qaeda rivals? Was it the result of a nefarious plot involving Saudi Arabia, Qatar or the CIA? In truth, it did involve a conspiracy of sorts, but it was a conspiracy of pragmatism, involving what can only be described as a tacit or low-level cooperation with the Assad regime. Within the Syrian revolution and the wider solidarity movement, much has been made about perceived collaboration between Daesh and the Assad regime. For some, Daesh is merely an extension of the regime, created and controlled from Damascus, while for others the Assad regime facilitated the rise of Daesh by releasing thousands of Salafi jihadist prisoners (which is certainly true), using the ‘rat lines' established during the Assad regime’s infamous facilitation of foreign jihadis, including those aligned to al-Qaeda allowed to enter Iraq during the Iraq insurgency.

Some even believe that the entire Daesh enterprise, past and present, is a byzantine Baathist-Iranian conspiracy, pointing to the fact that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a man with genocidal aspirations towards the Shia, was sheltered by the Iranian regime before the Iraq war.37 It’s pertinent here to understand that Daesh’s core is comprised of a mixture of indigenous Iraqi jihadists and foreign ones, drawn to Iraq during the US occupation (indeed, it is still a colonialist enterprise, as those who nickname Daesh-held Manbij ‘Little London’ due to the preponderance of British accents).38 There have been attempts, based on rather superficial and circumstantial evidence, to reimagine Daesh as a continuation of Iraqi Baathism. This theory confuses a number of different events, from Saddam Hussein’s attempt to co-opt the

36. Ibid.
38. thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/article1495804.ece
growing Sunni Islamist movement in Iraq during a brief pause in his ongoing brutal crackdown on Sunni’s by implementing al-Hamlab al-Imaniya (the faith campaign).  

Part of Saddam’s faith campaign allowed for Islamist Iraqis to become officers in the security services, so when the Iraqi insurgency against the US took off, many of these former Islamist officers won leading roles among different insurgent groups. Some gravitated towards Daesh’s predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, and some continue to be part of Daesh, but the vast majority were part of other insurgent groups. Daesh’s main leadership have absolutely no connection to the Iraqi Baath Party and the confusion mainly arises from identifying ideological Baathists with Islamists who were officers in the Iraqi security forces during the faith campaign era. One example is Abdullah al-Janabi, who was part of the Iraqi Baathist security apparatus but not an ideological Baathist, and is now part of the Shura Council of Daesh.

The actual heir of Baathism in Iraq is Jaish Rijal at-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiya (JRTN—‘Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order’), a Sufi paramilitary group led by Izzat Ibrahim ad-Douri, Saddam Hussein’s cousin and the highest ranking member of the Baath Party and former Iraqi Army left (though whether he’s still alive is a subject of much tedious debate). This force allied with Daesh very briefly during its sweep of the North in 2014, but it was not long before Daesh turned on its ideologically antithetical Baathist allies and the group have since withered into irrelevance. Oddly enough one of JRTN’s last statements was a condemnation of Daesh’s infamous burning alive of a Jordanian pilot and an appeal for Saudi Arabia and Jordan to fund them to fight Daesh.

To view Daesh as a continuation of Baathism is to profoundly miscontrue the ideology of Daesh (and Baathism, for that matter), mistaking Daesh’s pragmatism, such as allying with what Zarqawi once called ‘infidel socialists’ (Baathists), with some kind of ideological affinity. All of these conspiracy theories are a reaction to one of the stark realities of even the most extreme jihadists—they too are realists and pragmatists at heart.

39. telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1416155/Saddam-has-Koran-written-in-his-blood.html
40. meforum.org/5312/isis-baathist-hidden-hand
Realism and pragmatism have been key to Daesh’s rise. While there is absolutely no evidence for direct cooperation between Daesh and the Assad regime, and while, contrary to some of the more ideologically convenient accounts, they have often been involved in vicious battles with one another (indeed, Daesh’s initial strategy was to ingratiate itself with the rebel forces, leading battles and using the militarily effective weapon of suicide attacks, all the better to usurp them), it is beyond doubt that overwhelmingly the Assad regime and Daesh have strategically ignored one another at the expense of the rebels.

For Daesh not having to devote resources to attacking the Assad regime meant it was able to focus on building up what would become, and what now is its Khilafah, which involved violently hegemonising territories it initially shared with rebel forces. For example, in one of the most detailed studies of Daesh and Assad regime military operations in Syria, IHS Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC) found that in one year alone, 64 percent of verified Daesh attacks had been on the Syrians rebels.41

For Assad, the rationale for Daesh is twofold—firstly, by not attacking Daesh he is allowing them to attack and weaken the Syrian rebels, his main enemy, while, secondly, by allowing Daesh to usurp the Syrians rebels, Assad makes himself indispensable to his social base as well as posing as a frontline opponent in the global war against ‘terrorism’ that could spread to the West. If Daesh eclipses the Syrian rebels, it makes it far easier for Assad and his allies to portray the entire rebellion as ‘terrorists’ and ‘takfiris’ while the barrel bombs hitting schools, hospitals and homes are made a bit more palatable to the domestic and international audience.

The logic is not just: my enemy’s enemy is my friend, but rather my enemy’s enemy is my friend especially when my enemy’s enemy cloaks itself in nightmarish black and commits unspeakably brutal spectacles that so perfectly capture and fulfil the fetishised fears of the Western world in the ‘war on terror’ period. Though Assad’s own terrorism is much more deadly and destructive, it’s muted by the grizzly spectacles that Daesh makes of its very real violence, just as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s notorious be-

41. nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/syria-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-battlefield-data-suggests-n264551
headings came to eclipse, at least in terms of coverage, the actualities of the non-al-Qaeda Iraqi resistance to the US occupation. The relationship there was one of mutual convenience—Zarqawi got to demonstrate to jihadis and potential recruits that he and his group were leading the jihad against the crusaders, while the US used him to justify the idea that the fight in Iraq was solely one of the US vs. al-Qaeda—a justification for the entire ‘war on terror’ narrative. In Syria, with Daesh and Assad, it has been almost exactly the same.

Bearing this in mind, the JITC study mentioned before found that of the 982 attacks undertaken by Assad regime forces in one year, only six percent targeted Daesh positions, while the rest targeted the Syrian rebels.42 Nowhere has this strategic ignorance been so clearly illustrated than in ar-Raqqa, the alleged capital of Daesh’s *Khilafah*. When the rebels initially took most of Raqqa from the Assad regime, the regime ruthlessly bombarded it, but when Daesh pushed out the rebels, the Assad regime went for an entire year without attacking the city, only breaking this unofficial truce with Daesh when the US began its bombing campaign.43 Such was the extent of the lack of Assad regime activity against Daesh-held Raqqa that the group, in a bid to attract Muslims from around the world, began advertising it as a perfectly safe and family friendly place to live.44

As long as Daesh doesn’t infringe upon the areas key to the regime’s survival, and as long as it continues to focus most of its offensives on those who are attempting to threaten those areas, namely the Syrian rebels, the Assad regime has been more than willing to leave it be.

Without this indirect cooperation between Assad and Daesh, there is no way that the latter would have been able to build its Dawlah (state) and work towards a *Khilafah*. All across its territories Daesh has built up both civil administration and, more importantly, its revenue sources and funding capabilities. It was able to build itself up into an economic behemoth. And this is where the relationship between Daesh and Assad reaches

42. Ibid.
43. mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2014/12/12/as-assad-and-us-play-two-step-bombing-raqqa-assad-demands-us-bomb-more-efficiently/
44. huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/09/25/raqqa-islamic-state-syria_n_5872324.html
another level with direct cooperation occurring in the form of specific pragmatic deals.

Take, for example, the Tuweinan gas plant in Daesh-held Deir ez-Zor, which is perhaps the starkest example of the pragmatic dealings between the Assad regime and Daesh. The plant itself is a joint venture between the Assad regime and Daesh, providing electricity to both their territories. The regime even sends engineers to maintain the plant. In a special report for the Financial Times, the nature of this relationship was elucidated:

_The business deals do not translate into a truce. The two sides continually attack one another’s employees and infrastructure. The regime points to these clashes as proof that such understandings do not exist. In a written statement, Syria’s Ministry of Oil and Natural Resources said: “There is no coordination with the terrorist groups regarding this matter”. But it acknowledged some of its employees work under Isis “for the sake of preserving the security and safety of these facilities”._

But others describe the fighting as part of a struggle for better terms, where neither seeks to destroy the other. “Think of it as tactical manoeuvres to improve leverage,” said the owner of one Syrian energy company, who met the FT but asked not to be named. “This is 1920s Chicago mafia-style negotiation. You kill and fight to influence the deal, but the deal doesn’t end”.45

One might say this is raw pragmatism on both sides, but when compared with the intransigent exterminationist policy the Assad regime has towards the rebels, literally an attempt via air power to make life unlivable in rebel-held areas, we can only conclude that there is something more at play here than simple necessity.

In fact, far from the Assad regime using its air force to make life unlivable for Daesh, it has at times used its air force to pave the way for Daesh to attack the rebels. The most blatant example of this came in June 2015, when Daesh began attacking rebel positions in the North of Aleppo, particularly the city of Azaz, which, if captured, would severely impair the main supply into rebel-held Aleppo city. As Daesh approached rebel-held areas on

45. ft.com/cms/s/0/92f4e036-6b69-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673.html#axzz3r8NOmZfw
the ground, Assad sent in the bombers to attack rebel positions, forcing them into a retreat near the Turkish border, allowing Daesh to seize several towns and villages.46

Islam Alloush, a spokesman for the now defunct Islamist rebel coalition the Islamic Front told the Guardian at the time: “Yesterday, the regime attacked Mare’a (which was held by the opposition) exactly at the time when ISIS was attacking us... this helped them greatly... since 2013... the Syrian regime has bombed us to stop us fighting ISIS properly... ISIS have never attacked regime planes... they owe their success to them”.47

Along with the direct and indirect help it has received from the Assad regime, one of Daesh’s strengths has been its ability to sustain itself without any external funding. Daesh is an entity that understands one of the key necessities of statecraft—battling for and seizing the resources required to run a state like oil fields and power stations but also the resources that can generate revenue. Thus Daesh have targeted urban centres and oil fields, appreciating how they can both bring strategic and material value.

The Assad regime has been crucial to Daesh’s ability to generate oil revenue. By 2013, Daesh had managed to capture oil fields in Eastern Syria, but many observers thought they wouldn’t be able to either maintain the fields or find consumers for the oil. However, the Assad regime was once again happy to oblige, arranging several oil deals with Daesh, allowing it to generate hundreds of millions of dollars in oil revenue.48

Beyond its mutual collusion with the regime, it is important to note the extent to which Daesh has been able to finance itself using the resources it has seized by its own hands. Of course this is not to say that foreign funding is not part of Daesh’s funding structure, but, according to internal documents seized from the group in Iraq, this funding only accounts for around five percent of its total revenue and is almost entirely derived from sympathetic private citizens.49

46. theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/02/syria-isis-advance-on-aleppo-aided-by-assad-regime-air-strikes-us-says
47. Ibid.
49. mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24769573.html
Indeed, while the pro-Assad line is that its direct (or indirect funding) funding is mainly from Saudi Arabia and has been central to Daesh’s rise, all the available evidence shows that there has been no direct funding from any state, while the ‘indirect funding’ argument is simply a politically charged spin on the fact that many groups considered to be ‘terrorist’ receive funding from private individuals and organisations operating within various countries. Given there have been fundraising drives and initiatives among Islamists in the UK and US for Hamas and Hezbollah, we might as well say that the British and American governments indirectly fund these groups if we were to apply the logic of those who imagine that the Saudi regime turns a blind eye to this activity.

However in May 2015 it seemed that those convinced that Daesh were indeed fostered by the West and its regional allies as a means to overthrow the Assad regime finally received the ‘smoking gun’ they always wanted. The right wing lobby firm ‘Judicial Watch’, as part of their effort to implicate Hillary Clinton for wrongdoing in the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, had managed to obtain a leaked report from US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), widely reported among pro-Assad websites and media commentators as revealing ‘the West’ had deliberately nourished Daesh’s rise. At the time Seamus Milne, currently the Director of Communications in the British Labour Party, writing in The Guardian accused the “US of fuelling the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria”, while more recently award winning journalist Glenn Greenwald cited the attack in the wake of Daesh’s attacks in Paris.

One of the ironies of those who hold the US government and its various agencies as inherently deceitful is they quickly forget their scepticism when something is found that backs up their preconceived ideas of what is going on. Unfortunately for those who pounced on the document as decisive proof Daesh and ‘ji-hadists’ (a meaningless category in many ways) had been leading the Syrian revolution, the document showed nothing of the sort.

The document in question is an ‘Information Report’ concerning the situation in Syria and how this relates to the DIA’s work and nowhere does it describe the US as in any way fostering, fuelling or supporting Daesh. The report initially had a mid-level ‘Secret’ level security classification before being declassified. One suspects that if it had included revelations about
the US facilitating the rise of the world’s most powerful terrorist group that it might have warranted a higher grade of security classification, never mind being shared around 17 different government departments and eventually being declassified. Moreover the report is poorly written, error riddled and based on ‘informants’ from US agents and, perhaps, most importantly, Assad’s ally in the Iraqi regime.

The report’s first paragraph cited by conspiracy theorists as incontrovertible evidence of US or ‘Western’ collusion in the rise of Daesh and their leadership of the Syrian opposition, claims that “opposition forces are trying to control the eastern areas...Haska and Deir Zor (sic), adjacent to the western Iraqi provinces...Western countries, the Gulf states and Turkey are supporting these efforts”. The second paragraph claims that “if the situation unravels, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in Eastern Syria...and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime...”

The conspiracy theorists retroactively conclude that ‘Salafist principality’ means Daesh’s Khilafah, while the ‘Western powers’ means the US. Firstly, it is beyond reason to imagine that a report commissioned and written by the US government had anything to do with this alleged plot. Bearing this in mind, the document itself is a report—it identifies the supporters of forces who might create this alleged ‘Salafist principality’ as the ‘Gulf states’, ‘Turkey’ and the ‘Western countries’ but nowhere does it actually advocate the creation of such an entity.

Secondly, the ‘Salafist principality’ the report merely suggests might arise in Eastern Syria is explicitly not linked to Daesh, which in this document is erroneously referred to as ‘Jaish al-Nusra’ (the joint al-Qaeda and Daesh Syrian formation was of course called Jabhat an-Nusra in 2012, as opposed to the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham). This formation is differentiated in earlier paragraphs from what it again in error refers to as the “major forces driving the insurgency”, namely the “Syrian Free Army (sic—meaning the Free Syrian Army)”, the “Salafists” and the “Muslim Brotherhood”.

In other words, the potential ‘Salafist principality’ discussed here is not one the report’s authors link to Daesh or al-Qaeda. The report does not explain what it means by these ‘Salafists’ but it can only be assumed the report means the major Salafi forces active among the rebels like the largest non-al-Qaeda, non-
Daesh Salafi force, Ahrar ash-Sham which has actively fought with the Free Syrian Army against Daesh and sided with secular forces against Jabhat al-Nusra. Moreover, Ahrar ash-Sham, far from declaring a ‘Salafist principality’, has in areas it has helped liberate with secular nationalist forces overseen the institution of civil rule, particularly in Idlib.

This document is a report using intelligence from the Iranian and Assad allied Iraqi governments that erroneously predicts there could be a Salafi principality. It also confuses the tiny amount of aid delivered by a few Western countries, mostly France and Britain (mostly non-lethal aid subsequently cut by the British in 2013), Turkey and the Gulf states to mainly non-Salafi forces (organised Salafi fighting forces were extremely marginal in 2012, with the Islamic Front containing more non-Salafi Islamist forces than it did Salafi forces, only being declared in November 2013), with support for what was identified by their intelligence “sources” as “Salafists” (possibly the same sources that labelled the peaceful protestors in Hawija during the Iraqi spring as ‘Wahhabi’s, ‘Baathists’ and ‘a-Qaeda’). The report directly warns of—not advocates, encourages or hopes for—a resurgence of the Islamic state of Iraq in northern Iraq.

It is a major irony that this report far from proving the US fostered Daesh to overthrow Assad instead definitively proves the precise opposite. In fact it is a perfect iteration of US policy towards the Syrian revolution since it became a revolutionary war—revealing an extreme caution towards the prospect of a Syrian rebel victory due to the calculation that whatever follows Assad will threaten regional order, particularly the stability of US regional allies Iraq and Israel.

The US has never pursued a policy conducive to overthrowing the Assad regime. In 2012, Leon Panetta, then US defence secretary quite openly stated in relation to US policy and the emphasis on ‘stability’ with regard to Syria, “the best way you maintain that kind of stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, along with the security forces...that’s the key”. Does this sound like the agent of a power seeking to overthrow the Assad regime by any means, let alone doing so by fostering a or aiding an ultra-hostile fascistic jihadi force that would threaten not just the ‘stability’ of every US and Western ally in the region but potentially the world?
This is what the pro-Assad conspiracy theorists, at least the ones who are fools rather than knaves, seem to misunderstand—as the US understands, that order in the Middle East is finely balanced. Far from the US being an existential threat to the Iranian regime (a notion rendered absurd since the two countries embarked on a rapprochement following the nuclear deal), the US and Iran both have mutually balanced interests in the Iraqi regime and have done since it was created. Iraq is in many ways a joint though competitive enterprise between the US and Iranian interests. While this does not mean the two countries have not been locked in mutual antagonism and hostility, it does mean that as two pragmatic self-interested hegemonic states, they have much the same interest in maintaining regional order. This is blatantly apparent in their military convergence in Iraq as the two most important foreign elements involved in the anti-Daesh insurgency which complements their political and economic rapprochement.

The US’s main intervention in Syria has not been against Bashar al-Assad but instead focused on Daesh, but even here it has not primarily been about Syria. Air strikes against Daesh in Syria are intended to reduce its capabilities to move from Syria into Iraq and threaten the territorial integrity of the Iraqi regime and its ample energy sources.

There is a symbiosis between Daesh and the Assad regime with both relying on the threat of the other to entrench their own supremacy among their own cadre and social base. If Assad and Daesh are distorted mirror images of the other, the Syrian rebels are the only plausible force that could interrupt this symbiosis and smash the order that maintains these counterrevolutionary entities.

Another popular, powerful myth is that the AKP government in Turkey Supports Daesh. This conspiracy theory is drawn from older narratives relating to the AKP’s democratic successes in Turkey and are prevalent on the conservative right, especially neoconservatives and the Christian Right in the US. The general form of this conspiracy theory is cheap Islamophobia—the AKP as a conservative force espousing ‘Islamic values’ in its own eyes is regarded by the right in West to be politically ‘Islamist.’ This has been manifest in many ways, from the idea that the AKP are turning Turkey into a theocracy to the illiterate remarks of the Governor of Texas Rick Perry made on national TV during
the Republican presidential primaries that Turkey was “run by what many would perceive to be Islamic terrorists” that ended with Perry questioning whether Turkey under the AKP should be in NATO.

While much of this animosity from the Right stems from the AKP’s quite understandable hostility to Israel’s various massacres of Palestinians in Gaza provoking repeated criticism from Recep Tayyip Erdogan—not to mention the infamous Mavi Marmara massacre that inflamed tension between Turkey and Israel—the Left has also played up to it to an extent. One of the problematic dynamics of Turkish politics is that the ‘secular’ opposition have in the past represented elite liberal cliques while the AKP succeeded in rooting itself among a majority of Turkey’s moderately conservative population. So the ‘secular’ opposition has sought to portray the AKP government as ‘Islamist’ and a threat to Turkey’s robust secular state in the knowledge that this kind of fear in the age of the ‘war on terror’ resonates in the West.

While the AKP are historically rooted in Islamist politics and their social base contains Islamist forces, they are not in practical sense ‘Islamist.’ More pertinently, they are not theocratic in any sense whether incrementally or otherwise—they have preserved Turkey’s secular identity and have not sought to make Sharia the sole source of law or institute rule by the ulama. The AKP government can be criticised for many things but being ‘Islamist’ is not one of them while its politics are more akin to the European Christian Democracy of old. It is socially conservative, broadly economically liberal and democratic.

Given this existing attempt to link the AKP to more radical, dangerous tendencies in the Islamic world it is no surprise that they have been connected to the rise of Daesh in Syria. Much of it has to do with the fact that they have been one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian opposition and the armed rebellion as well as the country that has taken in most Syrian refugees (as many as 2m people) providing a lifeline of aid to the civilian population of besieged, bombed northern Syria. In this sense, the alleged support for Daesh is another part of the propaganda narrative that seeks to delegitimise and smear all those international forces that oppose the Assad regime as well as promoting the spurious idea that the Syrian rebels Turkey actually supports are Daesh.
But there is also another component involving the Kurdish issue. Since the Assad regime vacated Syrian Kurdistan allowing the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG), essentially the Syrian wing of the Turkish based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to rise from having relatively little to support to being able to build a one party state in Rojava, tensions between the region and Turkey have been high. Of course Turkey fears that an independent Kurdish territory on its doorstep would embolden the PKK to establish one in Turkish areas of Kurdistan. The situation is further complicated by the fact that a condition of the Assad regime’s vacating Syrian Kurdistan without a fight, was PYD agreement it would not fight against it. This has meant that Rojava—the historic name for Syrian Kurdistan—would not suffer Assad’s brutal bombardments and sieges unleashed on the rest of Syria and also saw Assad paying some of the bills for Rojava’s key civil institutions. This has led the PYD to smash the organic unity that existed between Arabs and Kurds in the civil phase of the revolution when mass demonstrations flying the colours of both the Free Syrian flag and that of Rojava were held against Assad. But agreement with Assad meant the PYD bringing this all to an end.

On the Syrian rebel side, Turkey has been keen for desperate rebel brigades not to become too close to any forces supporting Kurdish autonomy. These are the circumstances in which Syrian and Kurdish struggles, despite originally being one fight, have become separated and increasingly turned against one another. Part of this springs from the PYD’s constant claims that Turkey funds and aids Daesh which has attacked Rojava as well as rebel held territories, a claim accepted and echoed by the PYD’s comrades in the PKK and its political affiliate the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and by their left and liberal comrades around the world. Is there any basis to claims that Turkey funds or aids Daesh? To answer this question you have to return to the beginning of the armed rebellion. Before the revolution, Assad and Erdogan had been close allies but the moment Assad began to use militarised violence against unarmed protestors, Turkey disowned Assad and provided a safe haven for civil opposition forces. Turkey decided Assad was beyond reasoning with and that the only way of salvaging as much of Syria as possible, maintaining regional stability and lessening the burden on Turkey, was if
Assad went. Given the Syrian rebels had numerical superiority but were outgunned by Iranian and Russian armed and supplemented forces of the Assad regime which was also supported by Hezbollah, Turkey decided to open its borders to allow foreign fighters and some returning refugees to join the fight against Assad. There is no doubt that many foreign fighters went on to join Daesh’s approximately 19,000 strong foreign legions but the Turkish government (and many of the fighters themselves) had not envisaged this. Turkey thought the jihadists would be numerically small compared to the Syrians and would join ‘moderate’ rebel forces bring a financial boost to these groups too. Turkey was fatally wrong.

Like Saudi Arabia, Daesh is not allied with Turkey but has declared war on it. On October 9th 2015, mere months after declaring the Khilafah, Daesh released a video warning “Erdogan, the Khalifah of the Muslim Brotherhood” that “Turkey will be conquered with the shouts of ‘Allahu Akbar’”. The reference to the Muslim Brotherhood is of some significance because though the AKP is not affiliated to the MB they have both been in the vanguard of new developments within Islamism, namely pursuing the idea of Islamic democracy. In contrast to the traditional Islamist demand for theocracy, Islamic democracy maintains democracy and sharia are compatible and broadly accepts the need for the consensus politics required for the democratic system. This is the antithesis of Daesh’s ideology in terms of it being proximate or appealing to those whose Islamic identity is overtly ‘political’ but preaching against violent jihad while attempting to root Islamic politics in democracy. This approach has become the modus operandi of every MB affiliated group from Hamas (democratically elected in Gaza before being attacked by Fatah, backed by Israel and the US), as well as Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party and the democratically elected government of Mohamed Morsi which was supported by the Turkish government in the midst of a bloody anti-democratic counterrevolution. In the Daesh video referring to Turkey’s role in NATO and Afghanistan, Daesh also say “Turkey has spearheading the armies of Kufr in fighting the mujahideen50... today the people of treachery continue their malicious ways but in a new and different look”. This is appealing to the idea

50. Meaning the Taliban.
that despite Turkey having a government rooted in Islamism, it is actually just the same as the 'secular' forces of old.

In the same vein a Turkish Daesh supporter released a video message in August 2015 attacking the AKP government. The Daesh video claimed Erdogan “did not rule by the laws of God… he befriended Americans, Jews, crusaders, atheist PKK members, Ataturk’s secular friends, the Free Syrian Army and the apostate spies of the Saud family”. The Turkish Daesh jihad then urged the “people of Turkey to rise up” and repeated Daesh’s threat to “conquer Istanbul”. This was not the first threat Daesh made against Turkey. While Daesh has yet to establish a presence strong enough to declare Wilayat within Turkey, the group certainly has some Turkish sympathisers who are willing to heed such calls. In June 2015 two days before the Turkish general election there was a double bombing attack at an HDP rally in Diyarbakir killing four people. The alleged perpetrator was linked to a homegrown Turkish cell named ‘Domumacilar’ (meaning ‘The Weavers’) containing Turks that have participated in Daesh’s activities in Syria (attending training camps and fighting Syrian rebels and the YPG). Following this there have been two more attacks by Daesh on Turkish leftists—a suicide bombing in Suruc which killed 33 members of the youth wing of the (mostly Kurdish) Socialist Party of the Oppressed, and a double suicide bombing in Ankara that targeted a leftist ‘Labour, Peace and Democracy’ rally killing 102 people. In both cases Turkish and Kurdish left and ‘secularist’ opposition responded to the attacks by blaming the Turkish government. Selahattin Demirtas, the co-leader of the HDP, immediately responded by stating that the AKP government was complicit in the attack while many other leftists saw it as proof of a conspiracy or collaboration between the AKP and Daesh.

While the claims of Demirtas were overtly political and cynical, one of the genuine areas of confusion giving life to conspiracy theories, is why Daesh would attack leftists opponents of the AKP instead of government institutions? The answer is most likely that government institutions are harder to target (the Turkish state’s obsession with the PKK means that it has been criminally negligent when it comes to defending its own citizens from potential attacks by Daesh especially those who sympathise with the PKK) and that the attackers were unlikely to have been operating in a formally strategic manner. In other words, it’s
unlikely the attacks were centrally planned from Raqqa but were probably planned in Turkey in a manner to employ a concept from historian Ian Kershaw regarding the functioning of the Nazi party’s ideological practice without centralised diktat (“working towards the Fuhrer”), or working towards the Khilafah with sympathisers putting into practice Daesh’s ideological and strategic modus operandi. In this sense the obvious targets would be leftists supporting the forces fighting Daesh in Rojava as well as an attempt to sow further fitna (sedition) and further exacerbate the fault lines that divide Turkish society. Daesh does not want ‘chaos’ for the sake of chaos as the West argues but rather to ensure their order emerges out of chaos—their order with Sunni populations literally terrorised or militarised into acquiescence. This is a core feature of Daesh strategy—already evident in the Iraq war while Syria convinced Daesh of the efficiency and fruitfulness of the strategy. If the entire Arab and Muslim world could be made like Syria then Daesh think they could make a Raqqa out of Istanbul, Ankara, Riyadh, Cairo, Tripoli and who knows where else? The sky is the limit.

Another episode that cemented the Turkish-Daesh conspiracy in the minds of many was during Daesh’s much publicised siege of the Kurdish city of Kobane in the Kobane Canton in Northern Syria. Daesh pushed the YPG back capturing 350 villages and towns surrounding Kobane leaving an isolated YPG holed up in the city. Though Kobane was on the Syrian-Turkish border, Turkey refused to intervene on behalf of the Kurds. Many interpreted this as a sign of Turkey favouring Daesh and allowing it (even aiding it according to some) to smash one of Ankara’s enemies.

In reality the context of Turkey’s reluctance to intervene directly was provided by US pressure to join its anti-Daesh bombing coalition and Turkey’s scepticism of a campaign that completely disregarded the much greater evil of the Assad regime which Ankara like the Turkish based Syrian opposition, recognised as being in symbiosis with Daesh. In October 2015 Erdogan outlined the reasoning behind Turkey’s resistance towards military involvement in Kobane (and thus Syria), saying that “in the struggle against terrorism, we are open and ready for every kind of cooperation...however, Turkey is not a country that will allow itself to be used for temporary solutions...the immediate removal of the
regime in Damascus, Syria’s territorial unity and the implementation of an administration which embraces all will continue to be our priority”.

Turkey recognised that its intervention in Kobane would spell acquiescence to the strategy of the US coalition and betrayal of the Syrian opposition and rebel forces, so it refused. But there was also Turkey’s obsession with the threat posed to its territorial integrity by the existence of an autonomous Kurdish entity on its border. This attitude is driven by Turkish national chauvinism not an ideological affinity with Daesh—though of course this, in turn, feeds conspiracy theories among Kurds, conspiracy theories that also converged with narratives seeking to de-legitimise Turkey’s support for the Syrian revolution.

Turkey actually ensured the civilian population of Kobane was placed beyond harm by absorbing almost the entire 160,000 strong population of the canton while applying pressure on the US which was already active in Syrian skies bombing Daesh positions (though the Americans deemed Kobane to be ‘not a priority’), to carry out air strikes against Daesh on behalf of the YPG. At the time there was a conspiracy theory that Turkey had been treating Daesh fighters in its hospitals, as if this was evidence of deeper collaboration. The reality was that Turkey had been treating Turkish members of Daesh apprehended by its authorities as well as providing healthcare to fighters of all nationalities who ended up in Turkey. Treatment of YPG fighters was far more extensive than that of Daesh fighters.

Turkey is often accused of indirectly funding Daesh by buying its oil but this confuses the fact that Daesh has been able to use the region’s burgeoning black market to sell oil. Part of this black market includes mafias and illicit oil traders in Turkey and possibly even including corrupt Turkish government officials though there is no evidence of any state involvement, Daesh utilises middlemen to sell oil, often from local mafias, who never let the buyer know the identity of the seller thus making it extremely difficult for states to track or target its activities. Yet far from buying oil from Daesh, Turkey has attempted to shut down its oil selling capabilities as best it can.

Contrary to this intrigue, all the available evidence shows Daesh gets most of its revenue from confiscations, which is why it targets urban centres, oil revenues and taxes on civilian populations. In fact, in documents leaked from Daesh’s Diwan Bayt al-Mal (Ministry of Finance) in the Deir ez-Zor province
of Syria (Wilayat al-Kheir), translated and analysed by a leading expert on Jihadism Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, we can see in some detail how Daesh gathers revenues and sustains itself. Al-Tamimi writes:

Though ideological partisans often see a private Gulf Arab funding hand behind IS, the general consensus now seems to accept that IS is not dependent on foreign donors in any meaningful way, and thus largely acquires its revenues from resources within the territories it operates, including taxation, sales of oil and gas, antiquities and the like.  

Of their total income in Deir-ez-Zor, the largest percentage comes from confiscations (44.7 percent), with the second largest from oil and gas (27.7 percent), followed by taxes (23.7 percent) and electricity (3.9 percent). The confiscations in question take the form of a whole number of enterprises, ranging from the looting of homes and businesses that have been abandoned by fleeing residents to confiscating the property of civilians as a punishment for violating Daesh’s laws.

The ‘tax’ element of Daesh’s income is of greatest interest in terms of Daesh’s statecraft. Far from Daesh being cloaked in conspiracy and somehow anomalous, in terms of taxation it is not much different to any nascent state. Generally speaking these traits are hardly unique to Daesh when it comes to the formation of states which history shows is almost always necessarily violent, brutal, often a genocidal product of colonial projects and which often like Daesh’s Khilafah come into the world, to paraphrase Marx, dripping from head to foot and from every pore in blood and dirt.

Daesh’s appeal does not derive from some innate religious zeal or conspiracy but rather that in seeking to eradicate borders it has also tried to constitute itself as a stable order amidst the chaos. In the context of the Syrian revolution, with the Assad regime unleashing unprecedented destruction against civilians, the stable state offered by Daesh, (and tolerated by the Assad regime), has appealed to those who simply wish for order.

Also Daesh has actively sought, rather successfully, to diversify its income and revenue sources to avoid becoming overly

51. jihadology.net/2015/10/05/the-archivist-unseen-islamic-state-financial-accounts-for-deir-az-zor-province/
reliant on one single commodity whose curtailment could existentially destabilise its project. What the conspiracies and allegations of direct state and indirect state funding of Daesh miss is that Daesh could not exist if it relied on these things—its entire raison d’être is to exist by itself and for itself as an expanding state. State funding would massively hinder that goal and when you declare war on the whole world you invite enemies who are stronger to identify your weaknesses. If only it was as easy as pressuring a state to stop funding Daesh.

Yet this idea persists at the highest level of politics—Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, reacted to the Paris attacks in October 2015 by saying that instead of bombing Daesh, the UK ought to ‘follow the money’ while also claiming Saudi Arabia funds Daesh at the “aid level”. Corbyn is probably repeating the propaganda narratives of his comrades in the Iranian regime but the solution he offers is just as narrow and wrongheaded as the idea that Daesh can be bombed out of existence. In fact it is not even a plausible solution as Daesh does not rely on any kind of aid from Saudi Arabia or any other state. Those who perpetuate these narratives are committing a double crime—one, is obfuscating the material circumstances that birthed Daesh and maintain it (i.e. Assad’s far more destructive genocidal war). The idea that more bombing is a solution, and the fantasies of pretenders like Corbyn, are drawn from a similar unwillingness to understand this context.

While Daesh’s targeting of the ancient heritage of Syria and Iraq is often cited as an example of Daesh’s nihilism, fanaticism and barbarism (loudly proclaimed in well publicised demolitions of ancient historical sites as the cleansing of shirk from Dar al-Islam), again, in reality there is a more considered reasoning at work than mere dedication to cleansing the Muslim world of ‘polytheism’. The ancient structures are of no use to Daesh so they can be blown up but not before the artefacts contained within these sites have been looted and sold for extremely high prices on the black market. This is all part of the attempts to diversify its income and protect itself against ‘economic warfare’ and the targeting of its oil capabilities.

All of this revenue enables statecraft. As Nadan Feldman writing for Haaretz put it:
ISIS’ increasing economic empowerment, along with its continuing conquest of territory, has strengthened its financial confidence. Last June, it even announced plans to mint its own currency, which it rolled out in September. This plan is yet another step in realizing its desire to establish a sovereign state. Equally importantly, it illustrates the well-oiled administrative apparatus it has developed in the past decade. In fact, according to a report by the Rand Corporation last November, the basis for ISIS’ management model is “more akin to that of General Motors than a religious dynasty from the Dark Ages”.

This is precisely the raison d’etre of its taxation system, which, as has been shown, is the largest part of its income. These taxes are thought to amount to $500 million per annum that, in addition to bank robberies, ransoms from kidnappings, and so-called ‘piggybacking’ (where the Iraqi and Syrian states continue to pay for local government in Daesh held territories), is all used by Daesh for the creation of its own ‘civil society’—police forces, schools, religious education centres and so on. Daesh is a state whether one likes it or not—totalitarian, gangsterish and ideologically fascistic—but then it is hardly the first.

Daesh has both a centralised, hierarchical bureaucracy and devolved bureaucracies, each implementing the functions of a state. Sometimes these bureaucracies work in a ramshackle manner, but also sometimes in a manner more efficient than their often corrupt and incompetent predecessors, especially in urban areas where Daesh had successfully rooted itself among the populace and instituted its repressive apparatuses. Indeed, the New York Times published an eyewitness description of the manner in which the state apparatus and social relations in Daesh-held territory function much like before:

*Raqqqa’s City Hall houses the Islamic Services Commission. The former office of the Finance Ministry contains the Shariah court and the criminal police. The traffic police are based in the First Sharia High School. Raqqqa’s Credit Bank is now the tax authority, where employees collect $20 every two months from shop owners for electricity, water and security. Many said that they had received official receipts stamped with the ISIS logo and that the fees were less than they used to pay in bribes to Mr. Assad’s government. “I feel like I am dealing with a respected state, not thugs,” said a Raqqqa goldsmith in his small shop as*
Syria

a woman shopped for gold pieces with cash sent from abroad by her husband. 52

These are the realities of Daesh rules. It was precisely this convergence of circumstances—Assad’s strategic collaboration, the stable ‘normality’ of Daesh statecraft and the manner in which it absorbs vast amounts of income, etc.—that facilitated Daesh’s rise into a Khilafah. The Syrian war was a goldmine for Daesh both in terms of the resources it managed to gather, and figuratively, in the way its ultra-sectarian praxis was boosted by the sectarian slaughter of the Assad regime.

The Assad regime’s slaughter has underwritten the logic of Daesh’s ideology, allowing this ideology to be reduced to the level of material relations, exploiting the horrors and instability unleashed by Assad’s regime as well as the counter-productive reaction of imperialism to the rise of the Khilafah. In other words, regardless of the question of Assad’s direct intentions in fostering Daesh, the regime is ultimately its parent. As order collapsed, confronting Syrians with “annihilating death” (Zarqawi), something was able to fill its place—something melding its own fascistic ideology with the social relations of the modern state. This is tragically apparent for those forced to live under Daesh’s rule. In an article for The National Syrian, journalist and author Hassan Hassan describes how Daesh has managed to exploit Assad’s destruction:

A family of eight, for example, left the city of Deir Ezzor due to shelling and bombardment and lived in an ISIL-controlled town in the countryside. The family’s breadwinner could not find a job to sustain his family of four daughters and two sons, including one disabled son. Eventually the father sent one of his sons to join ISIL which paid a monthly salary of $400 (Dh1,469). The son was since displaced to fight for the group in Hasakah.

Another case is of a family from Hatla, near Deir Ezzor, who were displaced to a town called Subaykhan. The family’s breadwinner, their 21 year old son, joined ISIL to support a family of five. The man, who has only visited his family once

52. nytimes.com/2014/07/24/world/middleeast/islamic-state-controls-raqqa-syria.html
The Rise of Daesh in Syria

since he joined the group five months ago was sent to fight in the Iraqi town of Haditha.

Almost every state appeals to material necessity (i.e. military recruitment among the poor), the amplification of fear (using real fear to exploit people for the purpose of subservience and servitude to the state) and appeals to identity and existential threat (characterising a particular enemy as an existential threat). Daesh is no different—it appeals to all these with the difference that its particular ideology is fascistic and genocidal while there is a very real existential threat to Syrians.

During the ‘war on terror’ al-Qaeda was never going to sack New York or London, but in Syria the Assad regime has become an ultra-sectarian revanchist entity backed by a host of brutally sectarian foreign actors ranging from Hezbollah to the Iraqi militia Asayib Ahl al-Haq, which distinguished itself in Iraq’s sectarian war for its brutality towards Sunni civilians. Add to this the fact that Assad’s counter-insurgency tactic of bombarding rebel held or rebel supporting areas almost wholly populated by Sunnis (the number one cause of death and displacement), and you had symbiotic sectarianism in a nutshell. This context allowed a Syrian teenager from Deir ez-Ezor to take part in Daesh’s genocidal invasion force in Hasakah in Iraq.

Daesh embodies the chaos of Syria. Unlike the austere, clinical Salafi Jihadism of al-Qaeda and its cousin in Saudi, Wahhabism, which has every interest in maintaining order, Daesh espouse an apocalyptic vision that malignly mirrors the crumbling of order during the revolutionary war and their will to build a Khilafah from the chaos. Daesh teaches its cadre that a great battle is coming between Muslims and ‘Romans’ in Syria, a battle that will proceed Yawm ad-Din (the Day of Judgement) and mala-him (Apocalypse). The location of this battle according to the Hadith of Abu Hurayah will be located in no other place than the Syrian town of Dabiq near the Turkish border.

Hence Daesh’s English language magazine is called Dabiq, and the group fought a vicious battle to capture the strategically unimportant Syrian town. So Daesh not only claim they are trying to establish the true Khilafah but they also claim to be fulfilling a prophecy to bring about the end of the world and the direct reconciliation of mankind with Allah. This is the project Daesh are building from the chaos. The horrors and cleansing
are necessary preludes to the ultimate peace—the perfect society. These grand narratives are something that expansive totalitarian and genocidal enterprises have in common whether it was Nazism’s dream of the Thousand Year Reich or the utopia envisioned by Stalinism, and both of these phenomena cultivated chaos in order to impose brutal order and all for the purpose of achieving utopia.

On a minor note, this millenarianism in Daesh’s ideology reveals something of a class divide between the Daesh’s leadership and al-Qaeda—al-Qaeda’s leaders are drawn mostly from privileged, highly educated elite classes, such as both Osama Bin Laden and Aymen al-Zawahiri, while Daesh’s leadership are drawn from more from the middle and lower middle classes who are generally more sensitive to (and inspired by) the superstitious, folkish Islam of the Sunni Arab communities. In terms of Daesh’s foreign cadre, especially the young recruits from Europe, raised more on Lord of the Rings and video games than the Hadith, we can see how the appeal of this apocalyptic imagery is exploited by Daesh in their videos that utilise Hollywood period epic footage to cultivate this appeal.

One of the disorientating features of Daesh is that it is a genuine anachronism and an anomaly. Daesh harks back to the Islamic revivalist movements of the C19th that aspired to state building, such as the Saudi-Wahhabi state mentioned above, or the messianic Mahdi movement in Sudan that rose up against the Turkish-British government in Egypt. There is also an affinity (not necessarily ideological) in the histories of various transnational ascendant and collapsing religio-political entities throughout Islam’s history, whether it was the C11th Nizari Ismaili state of the Hashshashin or the various so-called Kharwarij insurgencies, or even in the so-called Caliphates that formed the backbone of the Islamic world. In this sense Daesh is rooted in the region’s history. But it is also unique—its form determined by political circumstances and the changing cultural aspects of Islam in the era of the ‘war on terror’—in its congruence with settler colonialism. Daesh has distorted the meaning of hijra—a historic term of great religious and cultural significance for Muslims that refers to Islam’s beginnings when Muhammad and his earliest followers migrated from Mecca to Medina under the threat of persecution in 622—taking hijra and reimagining this term to mean there is an obligation for every Muslim to come and fight for or work to
build the one true Khilafah. It is an attempt to push the spiritual and emotional buttons of those who appreciate the significance of this *hijra*. The image of the close-knit, persecuted early Muslim community taking flight is an extremely important foundational aspect of Islam, one that has been recalled by persecuted Muslims throughout the ages. Daesh’s use of *hijra* to promote the migration of jihadis to participate in a genocidal, colonialist project against local populations in the Arab world is a perfectly crude, brutal inversion of the foundational moral understanding of *hijra* for most Muslims.

The crude colonialist manipulation of *hijra* has been marked. Shortly after the declaration of the *Khalifa*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement declaring *hijra* to the Islamic State was a duty for all Muslims but he also issued a ‘special call’ for doctors, engineers, people with military experience and administrators: ‘The East is a career’, as Benjamin Disraeli once wrote. This call echoed those of European imperialist governments advertising for professionals to settle and colonise newly conquered lands in the C19th. This combination of anachronism and anomaly lends Daesh an otherworldliness, as if it leapt from the pages of an old history, or fantasy book.

This is partly why conspiracies abound when it comes to attempts to understand Daesh. Daesh’s behaviour is given a fantastical significance that lends itself to conspiratorial interpretation. Observers treat Daesh’s perfectly prosaic moves as signs of a fantastic conspiracy because they cannot fathom that such an entity, in its spectacular and alien grotesqueness, could possibly act in a prosaic manner. Alternatively, such is the lack of comprehension of Daesh that commentators substitute simplistic conspiracy theories for a complex phenomenon.

In trying to understand the symbiosis between Daesh and Assad we can note that both rely on the threat of the other to justify their own logics within their cadre and social base. Thus it is not too far fetched to suggest that Daesh and Assad are distorted continuations of the other. The Syrian rebels are then of course the only plausible antidote to both—they aim to disrupt the logic and smash the order that maintains both of these counterrevolutionary entities.

One element in Daesh’s rise is by far the most contentious and the most vital—the perception that the Syrian rebels were unable to effectively fight Assad and Daesh. The conspiracy
Syria

theorists in the Western media (who are by no means marginal) have often said the Syrian rebels, particularly the Free Syrian Army (FSA), never really existed to begin with, or only existed on an ideological spectrum ranging from Daesh to Daesh-lite. To any objective analyst of the Syrian revolution this is self-evidently absurd propaganda. But when such an argument is repeated by the much praised journalist Patrick Cockburn, one has to take it seriously if only in order to debunk it.

In truth, the very existence of the Syrian rebels (encompassing those forces whose primary goal is the overthrow of the Assad regime and the institution of a non-sectarian system of governance) is a miracle. These forces find themselves squeezed between the exterminationist threat of the Assad regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah and various Shia jihadist militias from around the world. This coalition has now been joined by the air force and artillery of the Russian Federation, as well as the counterrevolutionary fascism of Daesh. Yet the Syrian rebels endure.

When Russia intervened directly on Assad’s behalf it was not primarily against Daesh, as they claimed, but almost entirely against these Syrian rebels that allegedly do not exist. Indeed, Russia has assumed Assad’s practice of largely ignoring Daesh militarily while allowing them to advance against rebel positions, as seen recently in Aleppo—the jewel in the revolution’s crown.

As previously noted, one of the reasons that these conspiracy theories exist is to obscure why Daesh exist. If Daesh exist as part of a conspiracy fuelled by the Gulf states led by Saudi against Assad and Iran, then every Syrian and the entire world must rally behind the Assad regime. But if the reason Daesh has flourished is related to its (direct and indirect) collaboration with the Assad regime and, more significantly, the unprecedentedly brutal sectarian war that Assad fostered, then every Syrian must surely rally behind those seeking to overthrow the Assad regime.

And that is precisely what the Syrian rebels have appealed for the world to do. For unlike Assad and Daesh, the rebels had to start from scratch with an extremely limited core of experienced fighters, a few high ranking defectors from Assad’s Syrian Arab Army and with a periphery comprised of low-ranking inexperienced conscript defectors and civilian volunteers. But even the most experienced defectors to the rebel camp have not had Daesh’s battle experience against the US, the most advanced
military force in the world, and no experience of ‘asymmetric warfare’ against a standing army backed and supplemented by formidable fighting forces like Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah.

It was in this context that in early 2014, after months of Daesh attacking other rebel forces (including abducting and assassinating rebel commanders, and civil uprisings in Daesh-held territories), that a coalition of rebel forces, led by the Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front of the Free Syrian Army (a secular nationalist force that received limited funding from, rather ironically given the conspiracy theories, Saudi Arabia), and the Islamic Front, launched an offensive against Daesh. This amounted to a declaration to the world that Daesh was not only a growing and real threat but they were the only force willing and able to take Daesh and Assad on.

While the offensive was initially successful, the Assad regime opportunistically took advantage of the rebels diverted attention and limited resources and launched an attack on Yabroud, thus forcing the rebels to scale down their offensive against Daesh and divert resources to fighting Assad. It was the failure of this offensive, due to the rebels being over stretched between Daesh and Assad, and a lack of material support from those who had posed as ‘Friends of Syria’, that ensured Daesh were able to sweep in from Iraq and declare the Khilafah.

There are those who blame Saudi Arabia and the Gulf for the rise of Daesh. As I have demonstrated, these arguments are by their nature arguments in favour of the Assad regime and its allies. They are blatantly false and seek to obscure key facts that not only reveal Daesh’s origins but also deny the only social forces capable of combatting Daesh. They obscure the fact that without the Assad regime and its brutal war effort there simply would be no Daesh in its current form. If Bashar al-Assad had stepped down in 2011, following the popular civil uprising against his tyrannical dynastic rule, Daesh would never have had a presence in Syria, let alone have control over a large part of the country and the fates of its peoples.

The so-called ‘realists’ in the media and political class imagine that the only way to defeat Daesh is to support the existing state formations, agents of the regional status quo like the Assad regime, an argument that glosses the fact the Baathist rump state, despite being propped up by massive Iranian and now Russian
intervention, controls only 25 percent of Syria. They use conspiracy theories and bogus narratives about the supreme ‘terror threat’ of Daesh to justify the Assad regime’s counterrevolutionary war against those Syrians who stand opposed to both Assad and Daesh.

Bluntly put, as bad as Daesh is, the Assad regime is worse. Assad’s regime is responsible for 95 percent of the deaths in Syria and is a far greater threat than Daesh. Of the refugees forced to flee their homes and take perilous and deadly journeys to often unwelcoming foreign lands, the vast majority have fled Assad’s brutal counter-insurgency tactic of targeting civilian areas with his air force in order to separate armed revolutionaries from the people they seek to liberate—to sully the act of liberation itself.

Clearly an entity like Daesh, as with all forms of chauvinistic ultra-sectarian Salafi Jihadism, represents a wider phenomenon within the Arab and Sunni Islamic world, but this phenomenon will not be confronted by supporting an order whose brutality nourishes the roots of these kind of fascistic entities. The order is itself fascistic. These forces feed off one another—the exterminatory logic of Daesh is fed by the continued sectarian slaughter being carried out by the Assad regime, Iran and Russia, while the logic of the Assad regime, with its appropriation of the ‘war on terror’ is most forcefully reinforced by Daesh.

There is a third alternative. And it’s this alternative that the conspiracy narratives about Saudi funding, CIA plots, Gulf proxies and Western-backed rebels, truly seek to obscure. As with the Sahwat against Daesh’s predecessors in Iraq, the Syrian rebels are the only force capable of tackling Daesh and its more destructive root cause, Assad. That is why it is an imperative for all who support these revolutionary forces to expose these craven narratives for what they are.

53. time.com/4039940/these-5-facts-explain-bashar-assads-hold-in-syria/
55. dw.com/en/survey-leaves-no-doubt-syrians-are-fleeing-assad/a-18775789
The heroic resistance of the people of Kobane in fighting the onslaught of the Daesh (ISIS) fascists since mid-September led to a surge of international solidarity. A multitude of articles and statements have been written and protests have been held in cities across the world.¹ Kurds have flooded across the Turkish border to help their compatriots in the fight, despite being brutally pushed back by Turkish forces, and others, including Turkish anarchists from DAF (Revolutionary Anarchist Action), have gone to the border to support in keeping it open to help the flood of refugees escaping to Turkey.² There have been calls to arm Kurdish forces and calls to support DAF

and send aid for refugees. Yet this solidarity with Syria’s Kurds has not been extended to non-Kurdish groups in the country that have been fighting, and dying, to rid themselves of fascism and violent repression, and for freedom and self-determination. It’s often said, incorrectly, that sectarianism lies at the heart of the Syrian conflict. It’s necessary to understand to what extent sectarianism plays a role in our response too.

The protest movement that erupted against Bashar Al Assad in 2011 united people across Syria’s diverse ethnic and religious spectrum in a common struggle for freedom. Kobane was no exception. The Kurds who are the majority in the town had long suffered under the Arabisation policies of the Ba’athist regime, and were among the first to rise up when the Syrian revolution began. In one example, a protest from mid-2012, Kurds and Arabs in Kobane jointly called for the downfall of the regime and chanted in support of the Free Syrian Army, raising the Kurdish flag at a time when this was a dangerous act of defiance. But from its earliest days the Syrian protest movement in Kobane and elsewhere failed to gain international support. Had it done so, the country would not have been destroyed to such a degree that Daesh could have taken control of large areas.

Over the past three years, relations between Syria’s Arabs and Kurds have been fragile and changeable, subject to both the Assad regime’s manipulation of ethnic divisions, and to the misguided political machinations of opposition politicians from both groups who have put their own interests and agendas above the people’s vision of freedom. In spite of this, activists on the ground have continued to stress the importance of Kurdish-Arab unity and to

5. ‘Arabs and Kurds of Kobane: We Want Freedom’ (2012): youtube.com/watch?v=53W42QayTeM
resist ethnic and sectarian divisions. Few international solidarity statements have mirrored these calls.

The absence of Arabs from narratives of the struggle against Daesh is notable. Few articles have mentioned that fighters from Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions are also risking their lives to join their Kurdish compatriots in defending Kobane from religious extremists, or that recent weeks have seen greater coordination between Kurdish and Arab military formations. On 10th September 2014 local FSA brigades joined forces with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to create a joint operation to fight Daesh called Burkan Al Firat (Euphrates Volcano). The battalions involved include Liwa Thuwar Al Raqqa (Raqqa Revolutionary Brigade), Shams Al Shamal, Al-Tawhid (East), Saraya Jarablus and other smaller groups. This strategic alliance not only strengthens Kurdish-Arab unity at this critical time but also brings valuable experience to the Kobane resistance as the FSA has been fighting Daesh since the beginning of this year. In a 19th October statement the PYD affirmed that “This resistance shown by our units YPG and the factions of the free Syrian army is a guarantee for defeating ISIS terrorism in the region. Counter-terrorism and building a free and democratic Syria was the basis for the agreements signed with factions of the free Syrian Army. As we can see that the success of the revolution are subject to the development of this relationship between all factions and the forces of good in this country”.

Like their Kurdish compatriots, Free Syrian Army battalions have been resisting Daesh in Kobane with greatly inferior

7. See, ‘Kurdish fighters and Free Syrian Army Clash with IS at Strategic Border Town’ (Sep 2014): youtube.com/watch?v=Gg8HOZyOLBU
8. YPG FSA Agreement (Sep 2014): youtube.com/watch?v=qePezhg0DFg
10. YPG statement, 19 Oct 2014: pbs.twimg.com/media/B0RLSYVIIAEwWwB.jpg:large
Whilst Daesh possesses the heavy US weaponry it seized in Iraq, Syrian fighters (both Kurds and Arabs) have only light arms and limited ammunition. Both the YPG and the FSA have been calling on the international community to supply them with heavy weaponry. Supporting the call for weapons to the resistance is imperative to allow the people of the region to defend themselves from annihilation. It also reduces the perceived need for direct military intervention from external powers which operate according to their own agendas, ones diametrically opposed to the interests of the popular struggle. In supporting such calls we should distinguish between:

1. Support for a broad coalition of local forces against fascism and for a popular struggle which seeks to destroy as much of the old regime as possible, as well as supporting the right of self-defense of all people against mass slaughter (including their right to take arms from wherever they are offered as necessity demands)

and

2. Support for any political project or group claiming power in the post-revolutionary phase which will necessarily reverse the achievements of the revolution. The latter must be resisted.

Much of the international solidarity for the Kurdish struggle stems from support for Rojava’s inspiring social revolution. The Kurdish-majority areas of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane were able to establish the Autonomous Region following the withdrawal of Assad’s forces in July 2012. A Social Contract was developed which stresses the desire to “build a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs”. It affirms the principle of local self-government for all cantons of the region where governing councils and public institutions would be established through direct elections in a decentralised confederation. The charter enshrines unity and coexistence amongst the region’s diverse ethnic and religious groups,

a respect for human rights and an end to gender discrimination, and affirms people’s right to self determination. In a radical reorganisation of society towards democratic confederalism the people of Rojava have established councils and communes throughout Western Kurdistan to self-manage their communities in areas such as health, education and trade. This provides a powerful example of alternative forms of social organisation as a counterpoint to centralised, authoritarian control. Whilst such developments in radical democracy are a beacon of light in what’s fast becoming a region of darkness, anti-authoritarians should not romanticise the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Talking about the establishment of the Autonomous Region, Syrian-Kurdish anarchist Shiar Neyo states:

From the PYD’s point of view, this was a golden opportunity to impose its authority and expand its sphere of influence in the Kurdish areas in Syria. This political pragmatism and thirst for power are two important factors in understanding the party’s dealings with the regime, the revolution, the FSA, and even the Kurds themselves. They also help explain many phenomena that seem to bewilder some commentators and analysts, such as the suppression by PYD forces of independent activists and those critical of the party’s policies, in much the same vein as the Ba’athist regime did. By way of example, one can cite in this regard the Amuda massacre in July 2013, in which the People’s Protection Units (YPG) opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, or the closure of the new independent radio station Arta in Feb 2014, under the pretext that it was not ‘licensed’. The PYD’s forces have also assaulted members of other Kurdish political parties and arrested some of them under a variety of excuses; they have been controlling food and financial resources in the Kurdish areas and distributing them in an unjust manner on the basis of partisan favouritism, and so on and so forth. Such

practices remind people, rightly, of the oppressive practices of the Assad regime.\textsuperscript{14}

An obvious tension therefore exists between the authoritarianism of the old guard of the PYD which maintains a top down vision, and the thousands of Kurds who believe in, and are trying to realise, radical democracy from below and should be supported in that aim. But the Kurdish region of Syria is not the only place where a social revolution is putting into place radically new ways of organising, although it has benefited from greater space and stability, relatively speaking, when compared with other areas of the country. Experiments in local, autonomous self-organisation have been a defining feature of the Syrian revolution, and hundreds of local committees and local councils have been established to administer basic services and coordinate revolutionary activities.\textsuperscript{15} Yet these people are not seen to be deserving of international solidarity because they have no leader who has converted to libertarian municipalism.\textsuperscript{16} The fact simply is that they have no leader at all and these forms of horizontal organisation arose spontaneously from below as a response to the destruction of the state.

Furthermore, as the world’s attention focuses on Kobane, struggles elsewhere have failed to gain the media spotlight. In August, the people of Deir Al Zour, mainly from the Sheitat tribe, led a brave resistance against Daesh.\textsuperscript{17} In the following days, facing the fascists alone, the resistance was almost defeated and some 700 people from the tribe were executed by Daesh,


\textsuperscript{17} Leila Al-Shami, ‘The Deir Al Zour Intifada Against Daesh’, 4 Aug 2014: leilashami.wordpress.com/2014/08/04/the-deir-al-zour-intifada-against-daesh/
causing little global outrage.\textsuperscript{18} But the people of Deir Al Zour didn’t abandon their struggle against the ISIS extremists. In recent weeks the White Shroud (Kufn Al Abyad) has killed some 100 Daesh fighters in guerrilla-style attacks.\textsuperscript{19} This secretive popular resistance group is made up of around 300 locals, the majority of whom have never fought before but have taken up what arms they can raise to protect their families and communities from fascist onslaught.

As the world focuses on Daesh’s advances in northern Syria, communities elsewhere are continuing to resist the genocidal maniac Bashar Al Assad and his sectarian militias which have increased their assault on liberated areas since US airstrikes freed up the regime’s resources elsewhere. There’s been little solidarity shown with the people of Al Waer district of Homs, the last rebel stronghold in a city which was once the soul of the revolution. Al Waer is home to some 400,000 people, half of them displaced civilians who have fled conflict elsewhere in the country. The area has been under regime siege for months and in the past couple of weeks the Assad regime has intensified its shelling causing a massive humanitarian crisis. Syrian activists’ calls for solidarity with Al Waer have fallen on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{20}

The question that remains is whether international solidarity for Kobane arises from the Kurdish ethnicity of its defenders (i.e. they’re not Sunni Arabs), from support for the political position of a party (the PYD/PKK), or from the principle that all people have the right to defend themselves from terror, whether in the form of religious or nationalist fascism, and to determine for themselves how to organise their lives and communities. If it arises from the latter principle, then the same solidarity extended to the Kurds must be extended to all revolutionary Syrians.


\textsuperscript{20} Samersniper, ‘#Important #Our_Waar_Is_Burning’, 13 Oct 2014: samersniper.wordpress.com/2014/10/13/%E2%80%AA%E2%80%8Eimportant%E2%80%AC-%E2%80%AA%E2%80%8Eour_waar_is_burning%E2%80%AC/
The Iranian regime has found itself enmeshed, deeper and deeper in the Syrian civil war. From being a backer of Assad, it became the brain and muscle of his campaign against the revolution, and then the de facto occupier of parts of Syria. At the same time it has been difficult to see the strategic sense of the extent of Iranian interference in the country. At a time when the Iranian economy is flatlining, with concomitant social unrest just below the surface, it is difficult to see why the billions of dollars Iran is spending on its intervention helps the regime. While there is an obvious need for the regime to maintain its pathway to Lebanon and Hezbollah, it is not at all clear that a complete commitment to maintaining Assad’s rule in a section of partitioned Syria is the most effective way of achieving this. Indeed, it has effectively ended the wave of popular support that flowed all across the MENA countries for the Iranian regime that grew out of the Hezbollah’s victories against Israel, and Ahmadinejad’s supposed anti-imperialist love of the oppressed.

I want to argue that there is an aspect of the Iranian regime’s role in Syria that grows directly out of the dynamics of its internal politics, in particular that it is determined by the sociopolitical excess of the Iranian regime. I will show the structure of this dynamic, and why understanding and relating to it, is crucial for the movement for social justice and democracy in Iran. To do this I will lay out a brief history of the social groups that were
united by the regime in its revolutionary period, the challenges that are facing that unity, and how the Syrian war has affected the situation.

The Development of the Contending Classes

The development of twentieth century politics in Iran has to be told in the form of two stories. The first is the story of the struggle for social justice, national independence and political freedom that reached its first clear form in the constitutional revolution that began in 1905, and culminated in the revolutionary movement that erupted in 1977, and led ultimately to the historical supersession of the political currents that had dominated Iran until then in the debates, prisons and graveyards of the Islamic Republic. The second story is that of the violent collision between the social forces that dominated Iranian life from the rise of the Qajar tribe to Imperial power, and the forces of colonial modernity, and the supersession of these forces in the vast and fast paced transformation of Iranian society in the period immediately before and after the revolution of 1979.

Like many of the countries struggling against colonial domination, the history of Iran in the twentieth century can be understood as the struggle of different revolutionary sections of the middle class, and their attempts to build alliances with other classes. During the first half of the twentieth century, up to and including the struggle for oil nationalisation, the section of the middle class that can be called the ‘modern middle class’ led two ultimately defeated revolutions. After the final defeat of the constitutional movement and the rise to power of Reza Khan and his autocracy, a process of fast modernisation began in Iranian society. Up to this time the small section of middle class and skilled working class people in touch with European revolutionary ideas—creatively developing them in an Iranian context—remained limited to those workers and intellectuals from the northern regions, particularly Azerbaijan, who had acted as guest workers and economic migrants to the Tsarist and then Soviet Caucasian provinces that benefited from the Baku oil boom.  

the Qatar’s lacked the ability and vision to build a modern state, Reza Khan saw this as his primary aim, and his fundamental defence against both internal subversion (both left and nationalist and, after his introduction of some gender reforms, sections of the clergy) and the caprice of the imperialist powers, particularly Britain, who had sponsored his rise to power. Whilst the elevation of Persian to the only language of national communication and the pacification of the tribal areas were important tactics in this regard, his main strategy was to develop a strong and loyal military and state bureaucracy, while developing a network of court patronage that kept the elite loyal to him.²

In founding the Pahlavi dynasty Reza Khan had been careful to dismantle the political apparatuses of the classes that had brought about the constitutional upheavals. His campaign against freemasonry dismantled the patriotic secret societies that had brought both the modern middle class and the petty tradesmen, bazaars and clergy—or what we can call the ‘traditional middle class’—into the struggle. He also crushed the nascent Communist movement and its small but important trade unions. When its heroic leaders like Avetis Sultanzadeh were forced to seek haven in the Soviet Union, many of them disappeared in the purges, Stalin finishing the job the Shah had started.

Although the introduction of a brutal secret police, modern prison system and the anti-socialism law saw off the autonomous organising capacity of the working class, this class was still not fully integrated into Reza Khan’s system. Indeed, under Reza Shah the development of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company meant that a new, strategically important section of the working class was living in hellish conditions of colonial apartheid and looking for political ideas that would express its grievances. At the same time, unlike his neighbour and mentor Ataturk, the Shah was never able to integrate the newly enlarged modern middle class his policies demanded. He was busily creating a social class, totalling “nearly seven percent of the population… whose members not only held common attitudes towards social, economic and political modernisation, but also shared similar educational, occupational and educational backgrounds”. This class resented the lack of freedom, backwards nature of the country, and the increasing cost of living. Reza Khan also systematically and dramatically alienated the

more traditional petty, small and medium property owners. Where integration into the world economy through colonialism had made these groups a class in the modern sense, their social lives still revolved around various ‘traditional’ institutions; the bazaars, mosques, traditional gymnasiums, coffee houses and so on. Through his policy of forced unveiling, occasional threats of land reform, and attacks on the juridical power of the clergy, the first Pahlavi monarch waged a strong class struggle against this group, that culminated in the massacre of pilgrims at the shrine of the eighth Imam in Mashhad and, fatefully, his decision to pressure the clergy into moving en masse to Qom.

Thus, the Pahlavi state, with its increasing military and bureaucracy and elaborate system of court patronage, tottered above an abyss of social classes that it could not integrate into its political system. With the overthrow of Reza Shah by the allies during the second world war, and the resultant relaxation of political repression and censorship these classes burst back into the story.

The movement of the Tudeh party acted as the far left of the Mossadegh moment, and as such is broadly comparable to the tortuous relations between left nationalist movements and communist movements across the global south, particularly in Egypt and India. The Tudeh party, was no left sect, and indeed was probably the first mass political organisation in Iranian history, certainly it created the first mass trade union structure in the middle east. A quick perusal of the members of its central committee, or the court records of those arrested after the coup against Mossadegh show how two of the classes that developed under Reza Shah, with around one third being from the skilled working class, and two thirds from the modern middle class. Where pro Islamic Republic historians, or almost fellow travellers like Michael Axworthy, are want to dismiss the Tudeh as a wooden Stalinist tribute band with no real roots in Iranian society, the opposite was the case. The Tudeh enjoyed near complete hegemony over these two classes; not only did

3. Ibid.
4. In Revolutionary Iran, which has a lot of useful things to say about the history of the 1979 revolution and its antecedents, Michael Axworthy mounts a very eloquent defence of a number of historical and political points that are central to the Islamic Republic’s story about itself. Needless to say, he doesn’t draw attention to this.
it dominate the middle class professional unions and student unions, “the Tudeh was like an iceberg, with the party organisation corresponding to the visible tip, and the much larger labour movement to the hidden mass below... by the summer of 1943... organisers convened the First Conference of the Council of United Workers... delegates represented over twenty-six industrial, craft and white collar unions”.

Ultimately, though, and crucially for the issue at hand, this movement was undone by its inability to find a way to engage the traditional small property owning middle class and the rural poor, that is to say unlike Khomeini and Khomeinism, the Tudeh and Mossadegh were unable to unite all the classes that together could overthrow the Shah’s regime and his neo-colonial backers. Two sections in particular, that united around Khomeini, were unable or unwilling to be brought under this leadership. The traditional middle class, especially the more traditionally minded and religious elements around the Tehran bazaar, supplied the thugs who, hired with what at the time were called ‘Behbahani Dollars’ (Behbahani was a leading cleric at the time), brought Tehran to a counterrevolutionary stand still.

Though colonial powers (namely the US and UK) planned, managed and funded the coup, historians of vastly different theoretical and political persuasions have shown how these social fissures were exploited, rather than implanted, by their machinations.5 Most importantly, Ayatollah Kashani, who began the period by working with Mossadegh’s National Front, began to feel threatened by the rising radicalism of the Tudeh and its supporters, and himself approached the Americans for support. It was Kashani’s name and standing among the bazaaris in Tehran which gave political cover to the schemes of the reactionaries.

Necessary for the success of the coup was the loyalty of the national service men who carried it out, here too the class nature of the Tudeh proved its undoing. Where the modern middle class support base of the Tudeh included a substantial number of lower ranking and NCO officers, like the great martyr Khosro Rouzbeh, after the coup these sections were amongst the most brutally suppressed; the Shah’s regime had been careful to make sure that commanders of tank divisions based in Tehran were both better paid and subject to more rigorous political screening.

5. Michael Axworthy’s Revolutionary Iran, Ervand Abrahamian’s The Coup and Stephen Kizner’s All the Shah’s Men all agree on this.
than any other offices. The regime had also been careful to make
sure that national service soldiers stationed in Tehran came from
rural areas, and so showed much less compassion towards leftists
and nationalists than those from their traditional urban strong-
holds. Indeed, as the great oil powered boom of Muhammad
Reza Pahlavi’s reign, and his botched quasi land reforms brought
more of the rural masses to live in the slums and shanty towns
around Tehran and other major cities, this class would play an
increasing role, notably from the 1979 revolution onwards. Ul-
timately, the 1953 coup could rely on this group, whose direct
relations of domination with landlords, ethnic and tribal leaders,
lack of literacy and lack of links with other parts of the country,
had kept them isolated from the tumultuous half century that
shaken the rest of the country, meaning they felt very little na-
tional or class consciousness.

The Class Structure of the 1979 Revolution

The 1979 revolution was different. It was successful. To be so, it
managed to unite all the classes that had an interest in overthron-
ing the Shah’s regime and asserting Iran’s national independence.
Nothing short of this would have succeeded; we should remem-
ber the way that the Shah’s regime, America’s police dog in the
Middle East as Iranians called it, looked utterly undefeatable.

As a result of the long oil boom, the Shah had been able to
continue the policies of his father, increasing the size of the
state bureaucracy and army to a size Reza Shah could only have
dreamt of. This was underlined by the vast military contracts
that the Americans were signing with him. Partially as a result
of Iran’s role as a border country of the USSR, and partially be-
cause of the role Iran played in policing the whole region, wheth-
er by engagement of Iranian troops in the Omani revolution, or
acting as a pro US and Israel element in OPEC, the Shah enjoyed
access to the most up to date American weaponry, and was de
facto commander in chief of arguably the most advanced army in
the region.

At the same time the network of court patronage increased.
The Shah converted a portion of his family’s worth into the Pahl-
avi Foundation. The New York Times described it as a “facade
of charitable activities... used in three ways: as a source of funds for the
royal family, as a means of exerting control over the economy, and as
a conduit for rewards to supporters of the regime”. This high level of corruption, in which position at court determined business and economic success, led to the further estrangement of any Iranians from the middle classes with ambitions in the world of commerce. Indeed, the fact that a good portion of the Royal Family’s wealth came directly from oil payments, and that this was distributed to the loyalist and most influential courtiers, drove a wedge between the tiny rentier class and the upper echelons of the traditional bazaar that had saved it from Mossadegh.

As the ‘68 moment tore across the world, the shah was using his oil boom money to increase yet still the size of his state bureaucracy. As a result, a section of the traditional middle classes, as yet not integrated economically into the salaried world of state employment, and so more traditional in outlook and lifestyle were attending university when the Tet offensive, and the students uprisings in Paris arrived. For the young people from this social class the slogans of the day were to be written in the language of Shia Islam. Inspired by figures like Shariati, who translated Fanon and Sartre into Persian, this social group led their whole social class into direct political struggle with the Imperial regime. They also made a huge impression on Khomeini and his supporters. Khomeini, who in his early work describes a political world view that can be quite clearly called a form of reactionary clericalism, a reactionary clericalism which through its link back to figures like Sheikh Fazlallah Nuri via Jalal aale Ahmad, more or less directly took its cue from the kind of arguments that the catholic clergy were making against the European left in the late C19th appears to have been transformed by these writings, as much as the young students who would become his disciples. From the late nineteen sixties onwards he makes use of Shariati’s updated third-worldist left Islamist lexicon and starts using Mostazefin (the meek) to mean Fanon’s ‘wretched’, jihad to mean anti imperialist struggle, Towheed (monotheism) to mean a classless society.

As a result of the SAVAK’s brutal repression, the only political organisational form the dissent of children of the modern and traditional middle classes were able to take, apart from a handful of left leaning and critical occasionally tolerated Islamic cultural centres, were the famous guerrilla groups; the People’s Mujahideen Organisation of Iran, the Organisation of Iranian People’s Fedayee Guerrillas, and the various small groups they
inspired. The class nature of these two milieus is apparent from the lists of martyrs and prisoners that they produced. Both were in the main educated to high school level, and had a disproportionate number of university students. But where the Fedayeen had a majority who were the children of the modern middle class, with a substantial minority whose family were from the skilled working class, the Mujahideen drew a majority from the children of the traditional middle class and a substantial minority petty property owners and poorer bazaar workers.6

These two reflected two world views, the one tying marxist leninism to secular third worldism, and the other tying a broadly socialist view to Shariati’s innovative form of left Islamism. Importantly, although the two groups and their splinters sometimes had discussions about unification or the creation of a united front, this did not happen until the final days of the revolution, when Khomenei’s role as figurehead had already solidified.

As well as the arrival of this new generation of the traditional middle class, the rural poor and their shanty dwelling urban cousins were beginning to take a new political shape. Partly as a result of the complete repression of the left, and partly as a result of the well evidenced habit of rural immigrants to urban centres to cling around familial and social links back to the ‘village’, many of the shanty town dwellers relied on a network of low ranking clergy for basic social needs. Ironically, this also had its roots in the Shah’s drive to modernisation, centralisation and development of a large bureaucracy. One policy division of the shah’s ‘White Revolution’ and his later Rastakhiz movement was to centralise and state organise the appointment of low ranking mullahs to shantytowns or rural areas. In so doing the Shah’s state provided a ready made network to precisely that low ranking and traditionally poor section of the clergy that were most influenced by anti monarchist sentiment. As Asef Bayat wrote about growing up a clever boy in a Tehran slum; “My first experience of schooling in the city was with an Islamic institution. It taught the regular curriculum but places special emphasis on extracurricular activities including daily collective prayers, Quran reciting, and Islamic entertainment. The teachers were mostly committed young Islamists, including clergymen... I later realised that my school represented an instance of Islamist civil activism... a reaction to the secular education

and the growing foreign schools that the children of the elites attended”.

This uncontested political influence amongst the shanty town dwellers was one decisive factor in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

As the relationship between the super powers of the cold war changed, the Carter administration pressured the Shah’s regime to relax political repression. As in the brief relaxation of state repression after the fall of Reza Khan, a radical and confident expression of the different subversive classes burst out. Each of the revolutionary classes played a role. Whilst the old organisations like the National Front and the Tudeh came back to life and reactivated old networks, the modern middle class really began the revolution with a series of famous demonstrations around Tehran University, where students pushed and tested the recent liberalisation and protested the ensuing massacres, mass incarcerations and SAVAK attacks. A racist and homophobic diatribe against Khomeini in the pro regime Ettelahat newspaper also brought seminary students and the traditional middle class onto the battlefield. As mass strikes in crucial industries brought the working class out, all the social forces that had been present in the coup against Mossadegh, and that the regime and the imperialists had been able to divide, where now married against the Shah and the Imperialist system that kept him in place. Anyone with a sense of the tragic would want to draw attention to the narrative significance of the final act that toppled the regime; the only joint action by the Fedayeen and the Mojahedin, against the officers of the Imperial Guard and the SAVAK, which left the revolutionary forces in de facto control.

Khomeini and Khomeinism

When Khomeini entered Iran, the country was undergoing a revolutionary spring. A huge variety of political groups were vying for support, the press was free and new forms of culture and art were being produced. Everything seemed possible. The chant ‘Freedom, National Independence, Islamic Republic’ meant many different things to the vast array of people who chanted it, but

stood clearly in the tradition of the Iranian movements that had begun with the constitutional uprising.

The Fedayeen and Tudeh had started organising openly and had considerable influence amongst the organised working class and modern middle class, as did the reborn National Front and its National Religious splinter, The Iran Liberation Movement. The Mojahededin held support amongst the traditional middle classes, the petty property owners and the urban poor where they competed with the Islamic Republican party.

It would have been difficult to negotiate this terrain for anyone, but Khomeini had two things that were crucial to his success, the absence of which goes some way to explaining Iranian policy on Syria. He had a fluid set of political ideas that he had developed over forty years, that could more or less promise anything to anyone and he had unworldly personal charisma. His ability to move between the language of the high mystic and the language of the backstreets around the bazaar was an innovation that took the country. He managed to move between the levels of father of the nation, mystical guide, morally flawless leader and door to the future, in the mind of people from all classes. Famously, in the weeks leading up to the revolution his face was seen on the moon. Zahra Rahnevard, noted international scholar of Foucault, famous reformist politician and wife of prime minister Mousavi, has talked about seeing it; this was not a vision limited to Iran’s vast swathe of poor and illiterates. Commenting on Cixous and Clement’s *The Newly Born Woman*, Sandra Gilbert described *jouissance* as a “fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political which escapes hierarchical bonds”.

To the armed children of the traditional middle class Khomeini was the utopian bridge between Islam and Marxism, to the modern middle class he was the heir of Mossadegh, or the much waited for face of the progressive clergy and national bourgeoisie. In his evolving work on the functions of the ‘father’, Lacan describes the imaginary father as a composite of all the imaginary constructs a subject builds up in fantasy. He is both the all

---

9. This is described by almost all contemporaries, for a detailed description see Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, University of California Press, 1993.

protective figure that guarantees safety, and the obscene father who “fucked the kid up”,11 the source of all its persecutions. That this is true of Khomeini in the case of a great many Iranians across all social classes, should be clear to anyone who has met a few.

Not only was Khomeini personally able to project an image that won over sections of all classes—commanding particular respect amongst the traditional middle classes, petty property owners and shanty town dwelling poor—his politics were able to capture the loyalty of the same groups. His forty years of hugely shifting political priorities meant that he could shift from position to position, one day arguing for land to be granted to the rural poor, the next pointing to the Quranic verses that position Islam as a great bastion for the defence of private property.12

Obviously this political shape shifting threw up problems, as the collapse into factionalism and ultimate liquidation of the Islamic republican party after the defeat of their rivals shows. The divisions internal to the traditional middle class, petty property owners and rural poor revealed themselves in the left and right factions of the party which Khomeini constantly hopped between.13 At the same time Khomeini had to keep on board the sections of the working class and modern middle class he’d won over. One strategy here might have been to extend the space of legitimate political views within the public sphere. He rather famously didn’t choose this option. Instead he chose a two pronged strategy. He first turned the class contradictions within his movement outwards, finding enemies, or sometimes creating them. The necessity for external enemies is obvious from the collapse of the Islamic Republican Party, along the above-mentioned factional right and left lines almost immediately after the final defeat and repression of all actually existing opposition parties (the left being pro Mousavi, pro state subsidy and in some cases for the limitation of the role of the vilayate faqih, and the right more pro haute bazaari, for a strengthened role for the vilayat and, crucially, relating to more traditionally well off clerics like Mesbah Yazdi). At the same time, responding to pressure

13. Ibid.
from exactly that newly university educated, traditional middle class that provided its cadre, the Islamic Republic began to increase the size of the state and army, at once giving it the ability to seemingly rise above class antagonism as an actor, and provide more jobs for the class who fought and died for it. We do not need a de Tocqueville to see that, in this way, the revolutionary regime continued the line of development of the ancien regime.\(^14\)

These developments are described in classical Marxist terms in Peyman Jafari’s Rupture and Revolt in Iran:

\[\text{The state in the Islamic Republic acquired relative autonomy from social classes and the struggle between them, just like other populist regimes that are often associated with Bonapartism. This is, as Marx analysed in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, a situation where a charismatic leader claims to stand above class divisions and to represent ‘the people’ through the state apparatus and corresponding mass organisations. Because the relative autonomy of a Bonapartist state depends on the power equilibrium between the bourgeoisie and the working class, it is inherently unstable. However, this changes when the state bureaucracy creates its own independent socio-economic base through its control of the means of production and itself becomes a class… The Islamic Republic arose from a Bonapartist moment (1979-83) but then expanded the state bureaucracy, giving it control over large parts of the economy, most importantly oil revenues. In doing so… ‘Khomeinism’ provided members of the new middle class with upward mobility and enabled them to combine religious devotion and material advance.}\(^15\)

Perhaps the most striking example of the particular way in which Khomeini combined this Bonapartist approach to class contradiction with his own charisma is in his famous title, ‘Imam’:

‘Khomeinism, strikingly like other populisms, elevated its leader into a demigod towering above the people and embodying their historical roots, future destiny and revolutionary martyrs. Despite all the talk about the people, power emanated down from the leader, not up from the masses. Thus the title of imam should be seen not as purely religious but as the


\(^{15}\)Peyman Jafari, Rupture and Revolt in Iran, isj.org.uk/rupture-and-revolt-in-iran/
Shii-Iranian version of the Latin American El Lider, El Conductor, Jefe Maximo and O Paid do Povo”. To put it another way, seeing the Imam in the moon is like seeing the face of the one who regulates an experience at once political, religious and erotic. The problem for the regime would come when Khomeini was not around to hold things together anymore.

As the war came to an end, the nature of the regime as ‘inherently unstable’ came back to the fore. Khomeini sought to address this by finding a new external enemy, and finding a new way of cementing internal unity. These he found in the shape of the Rushdie affair, and the 1988 prison massacres.

These ‘executions’ are shrouded in mystery. The Islamic Republic still does not admit to having carried them out publicly. Somewhere around 6000 prisoners, a majority from the Mujahedin and the rest from leftist prisoners, were killed. There is still debate about why this occurred, but scholars as disparate as Abrahamian and Axworthy agree that “what happened does seem to bear the interpretation that Khomeini used the massacres, as he had used the hostage crisis, to create a complicity among the leadership of the country, to enforce a renewed radicalism and to weed out those whose commitment was lacking”. We will see how the same is true of the regimes’ imperial intervention in Syria.

Disintegration of the Popular Front—The Class Structure of the Green Movement

The Green movement of 2009 showed the real problems inherent to the class structure underlying the Islamic Republic, and resulted in a drastic crisis of the state’s legitimacy in the minds of large sections of its population. To understand this we have to look at that emerging class conflicts that converged on the election result.

After Khomeini’s death, Rafsanjani’s installation of Khomeini as supreme leader can be seen as an attempt to cement together the increasingly warring factions of the bazaari bourgeoises...
The problem with this approach is that it was an expression of a difference wholly internal to a new social class—the increasing numbers of ‘millionaire mullahs’ who had “grown out of the interstices between the bazaar, the government and control of the ‘Foundation of the Oppressed’,” (the foundation that had succeeded the Pahlavi foundation).20 As such, it left out three important sections of the movement that Khomeini had managed to hold together; the poorer middle class and intelligentsia, sections of the working class, and the shanty dwelling urban poor. Of these groups it was the poorest who first kicked the regime in the teeth.

As in many countries that face intense political repression, it is sometimes easier to discern the social currents in Iranian society through cultural output rather than explicit political positions, especially, in the Iranian case, through cinema.21 Where the militant mood of the newly educated traditional middle class, as well as the modern middle class came to the surface with the birth of the Iranian new wave and films like Gav. Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s The Marriage of the Blesses tells the story of Hajji, a young soldier from a traditional property owning background who returns from war “with psychological scars and finds it difficult to adapt to the new situation”. In the opening scene the camera catches revolutionary slogans on the wall through the logo of a Mercedes. The driver turns out to be Hajji’s future father in law, a rich cleric. Outraged by the hypocrisy of the religious rich, Hajji stands up at his wedding to ‘welcome’ the guests with these cynical words: “Those who have come with different socks on their feet

19. Ibid.
20. Peyman Jafari, Rupture and Revolt in Iran, op. cit.
[because they are poor], be welcome! Also those who have come with different cars, be welcome!".\(^{22}\)

That Makhmalbaf’s family background and journey through the revolutionary years was typical of the poorer traditional middle class university educated cadre of the Islamic Republic, should have given the regime cause for concern. Instead the group around Rafsanjani continued to roll back the populist subsidies introduced under Khomeini and push ‘liberalisation’. Whilst these policies pushed up the consumer price index and increasingly alienated the lower classes, those at the top got richer and richer: “Asadollah Asgaroladi exports pistachios, cumin, dried fruit, shrimp and caviar, and imports sugar and home appliances; his fortune is estimated by Iranian bankers to be some $400 million. Asgaroladi had a little help from his older brother, Habibollah, who, as minister of commerce in the 1980s, was in charge of distributing lucrative foreign trade licences”\(^{23}\).

In the years after the war reconstruction greatly increased the number and social weight of the urban working class and poor. By 1991 the flow of population from the rural to the city areas, already quickened under the Shah, grew faster still. As the numbers increased and the neoliberal austerity inflicted by the Rafsanjani administration began to bite, city authorities began to clamp down on the myriad strategies that slum dwellers used to survive (pirating electricity, squatting houses and so on). The result of this was a series of slum riots and uprisings, beginning in Tehran’s Islamshahr, but ultimately taking in slum districts in major cities in most provinces, including Shiraz, Isfahan and Tabriz. As the government also increased the price of public transport, water and power, the flames spread and lasted for the next five years. Dozens were killed, including policemen, in cases that received very little coverage in the press, Western or Iranian, leftist or mainstream.

By 2009 two more of the groups that had been watching Khomeini’s moon since the political repressions of the 80s had fallen out of step with the regime. First, the resurgence of the Tehran Bus Workers’ Union had inspired similar growth and resurgence of independent trade unions all over the country. This movement was for elementary political and organisational free-

\(^{22}\) Peyman Jafari, Rupture and Revolt in Iran, op. cit.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
dom of the working class movement, and for the recognition of unions beyond the government controlled Islamic Labour Organisations—organisations that invited bosses to share a platform on Mayday demonstrations. Although it is difficult to know how many days are lost annually to strike action in Iran, more and more campaigns for recognition and against ‘blank signature’ contracts spread amongst the automobile, oil, state education, public transport and fishing industries. After a brief hiatus around the repression of the Green movement, these demonstrations have increased once more, in the last two years, particularly with the recent teachers strike.

“With 140 strikes reported in October 2005, followed by 120 in November, it was clear that by the end of Khatami’s presidency workers’ militancy was becoming a major concern for the government and employers, especially as the protests were becoming politicised”. In 2005 Reuters reported, “Thousands of banner-wielding Iranian workers rallied in Tehran, marking Labour Day with sharp criticism of the Islamic republic’s ambitious privatisation plans. ‘Stop privatisation, stop temporary contracts’, workers chanted”.

Second, the Iranian student movement was organising part of the generation of ‘baby boomers’ born after the revolution and war, which gives it one of the youngest populations in the world. This generation of students had been galvanised by the repression that followed the 1999 Tehran uprisings around the university, and given confidence by the rise to government of the reformists around Khatemi. The cadre that had led the student uprising of 1999 was smashed brutally by the regime, with one of the large student organisations banned, and leaders of both the national organisations were imprisoned, with 1500 jailed for considerable terms, torture, ‘disappearances’ and some dying under suspicious conditions in prison.

26. Peyman Jafari, Rupture and Revolt in Iran, op. cit.
27. Cf for instance hrw.org/news/2006/08/02/iran-imprisoned-dissident-dies-custody
The fact that almost the same slogans were raised by students at the same universities, in spite of this repression obviously implies that there is an underlying inability of the regime to integrate this social group; “Upcoming decades will test the regime’s ability to juggle the competing demands of these populist programs with those of the educated middle class—especially the ever expanding army of university graduates produced, ironically, by one of the revolution’s main achievements. This new stratum needs not only jobs and a decent standard of living but also greater social mobility and access to the outside world—with all its dangers, especially to well-protected home industries—and, concomitantly, the creation of a viable civil society”.28

The most profoundly shocking and worrying symptoms of the ferment that the Green Movement tapped into, from the point of view of the regime, must have been those that most brought to mind the downfall of the shah thirty years before. Firstly, the presence of a generation of middle class and lower middle class young people, educated to fill roles in an expanding state, that was not in fact expanding fast enough. Second, there was the participation of sections of the working class and urban poor. Although in the media the events were presented as pitting the educated middle classes against some sort of inert and primitive mass of uneducated Iranians, this was far from the case. For instance, during the election campaign Mousavi and Karoubi had been welcomed hysterically in some of the poorer areas in the south of Tehran.29 Moreover, Mousavi held an iconic role as the great ‘left’ prime minister of the early Islamic Republic who had introduced many populist economic policies. Finally, the demonstrators, at first to the consternation of Mousavi and Karoubi used slogans and chants that were directly calling on memories of the 1979 revolution.30 The green movement then, in both its class composition and political orientation can be seen

28. Ervand Abrahamian, Why the Islamic Republic has Survived 2009
29. Michael Axworthy, Revolutionary Iran
30. ‘Toop, tank, basiji, digar asar nedarad’ (Canon, tanks and militia men dont have an effet anymore) or ‘Marg bar diktator’ (Death to the dictator) are just two examples of the way young demonstrators playfully adapted revolutionary slogans they had learned about in their school history text books. Both Žižek and Dabashi in different ways pay attention to this phenomenon during the Green movement. Later the famous ‘Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic’, became ‘Freedom, Independence, Iranian Republic’.
as the return of a repressed radical-populist core at the heart of Khomeinism.

From the Crushing of the Green Movement to Syria

In the period after the crushing of the Green movement a number of shifts occurred in Iranian society, that brought some of the tendencies I have already outlined into sharper focus. Partly, these were to do with policy decisions made by the regime, and partly to do with external factors.

In the first case, there is the increasingly obnoxious shape of the contemporary Iranian ruling class. This is a ruling class that, though constantly at war with itself, has the same knack for cohering around key issues that keeps all ruling classes together. Kaveh Ehsani calls the relationship between pseudo privatised sections of the state, the military establishment and organisations like the Foundation of the Oppressed ‘neoliberal state capitalism’, and this captures the nature of the state at this stage. This neoliberal state capitalism, developed to deal with the uprising of 1999 and 2009, has solidified as a result of the recent sanctions and the regime’s Syrian adventure.

Neoliberal state capitalism in Iran unites three groups at the top of society. First is the clique at the top of the regime’s state apparatus, who have been notoriously and infamously enriched over the last twenty years. The recent death in a motor accident of the grandson of Ayatollah Rabbani-Shirazi, one of Khomeini’s close advisors and ‘Imam’s special representative’ in three provinces shows this. When Mohammad Rabbai-Shirazi’s body was found, next to that of his unwed girlfriend Parivash Akbarzadeh and his newly bought Porsche car, he became a figure of hate, symbolising the section of the regime ‘revolutionary’ establishment that cares nothing for the rules it asks others to follow and has used its closeness to the centres of power, tenacity and the economic situation created by the sanctions to make themselves infamously wealthy, and Iran one of the most unequal societies on earth.\(^{32}\) Figures like the self proclaimed leader of the econom-

---

31. merip.org/mer/mer250/survival-through-dispossession
32. theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/15/irans-unequal-revolution-income-disparity
ic resistance and ‘economic basiji’, Babak Zanjani, exploited their links to the state, international markets, the security apparatus and capital to create vast fortunes ‘busting sanctions’ on behalf of the Iranian regime: “The central bank was running out of money,” Zanjani told national and international press, “they asked me to bring their oil money into Iran so the system could use it… So that is what I did”. The New York Times estimates his personal wealth at $13.5 billion.\(^3\) Whilst Zanjani has fallen from favour, probably because of his unwillingness to follow the tradition of regime capitalists in public and play ‘modest and humble’, his story is illustrative of the new breed of the Iranian financial elite. Bound up with the regime and benefiting from servicing its needs.

As Saeed Hajjarian, the leading reformist strategist, said; “During Khatami’s first term, the private sector was a mainstay of the reformist movement, but that is no longer true. The private sector is more concerned with stability and order than with democratic reform, and some elements of it have now formed links with the conservatives… The private sector is now part of the problem facing democracy in Iran”.\(^3\)

At the same time, the role of the Revolutionary Guards in society has greatly increased, especially in determining internal and external policy for the Islamic Republic. Whilst the Guard had been slowly growing in economic power, to the point where it and its various fronts represent probably the single biggest enterprise in Iran, they first began to enter the political arena as independent political actors under the Khatami administration, in response to the growing student unrest that led to the uprising of 1999, mentioned above. The roots of this uprising lie in the open letter of around two dozen high ranking Revolutionary Guard commanders to “not stand idly by” (widely interpreted as meaning to overthrow the Khatami administration in a coup) if they did not act against student protestors. Two prominent names on this petition were those of Qasem Sulymani and Hossein Hamadani, will be familiar to everyone watching the Syrian Revolution. Indeed, Hamadani was involved with the crushing of the Green Movement to such an extent that he embarrassed

33. nytimes.com/2013/10/05/world/middleeast/to-this-tycoon-iran-sanctions-are-like-gold.html?action=click&module=Search&region=earchResults&mabReward=relbias%3Ar&url=http%3A%2F%2Fque ry.nytimes.com%2Fsearch%2Fsitesearch%2F%23%2FBabak%2BZanj ani%2F

34. Peyman Jafari, Rupture and Revolt in Iran.
the regime: When he was quoted as saying that his men had “cut the spines of” 830 protestors, the Revolutionary Guard press team had to go into crisis mode, as this figure alone dwarfed the officially admitted fatality figures. 35

So, in the period after the Green Movement the Iranian regime has seen the development of two powerful factions. The first focused around the international links that the corrupt opening up of foreign trade links has created. The second centred around the brutally totalitarian brotherhood who rose to the top of the armed forces, particularly the Revolutionary Guard. Whilst the first has floundered, nailing its colours to the pro-Rafsanjani wing and then reverting back to the circle around Khamenei, the second has provided a clear line and a brief and disastrous dalliance with Ahmadinejad and his clique, which it has basically publicly repudiated by calling him a ‘deviant’, 36 found its way back to the office of the supreme leader. Khamenei thus had to find a way to unite these forces around him, and repair the fractured popular alliance of classes that the Islamic Republic is built on.

Where Khomeini had his immense charisma and leadership abilities to cohere his chameleon politics and unite disparate classes around him, Khamenei has none of these. Instead, he has always used his speeches to pontificate on a threat from outside attempting to destabilise the country. He famously referred, for instance, to alleged foreign hand string up the 2009 Green Movement. As such, the situation in Syria, in particular the growth of ISIS, must have come as a godsend.

Class Responses to the Syrian Revolution

The first days of the so-called Arab Spring inspired the classes that I have described as fracturing from the regime. Spontaneous demonstrations in Tehran rang to the chants of ‘Whether Tehran or Cairo, Death to Oppressors’ and ‘Whether Tehran or Cairo, Dictators must Go’. 37 Nevertheless the transformation of the narrative of democratic uprisings into one of sectarian war has been immensely useful to the alliance between the Revolu-

---

35. en.iranwire.com/features/6826/
36. theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/20/mahmoud-ahmadinejad-deviant-president-editorial
37. youtube.com/watch?v=2Q_SoJQMR6U
tionary Guards and the Islamic Republics capitalists that form the kernel of ‘neoliberal state capitalism’ in Iran.

The last time I was in Iran I had a series of conversations with young people who, while not members of any large opposition or pro-regime organisation, are members of the same social classes that participated in the green movement. This was in 2014, well into the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS. These were people who, the last time I had been—just before the green movement—would tell me that democracy and freedom were only a matter of time away from a country like Iran, with such a young and well educated, though poor, population. But this visit was different. Time and time again, the same response was forthcoming; that the experience of Libya and Egypt, but most crucially Syria had put a generation off seeking radical change. However bad the system here, came the argument, we have Daesh (ISIS) next door. At least the regime protects us from that. Which is to say, the ideological narrative that attempts to secure the Islamic Republic’s floundering political legitimacy amongst the lower middle classes, working class and urban poor depends, increasingly, on an imperialist narrative of reducing all Syrian revolutionaries to ‘ISIS terrorists’.

There are specific articulations of this that are designed to penetrate each of the three social classes that I have sketched out as increasingly in conflict with the regime. In the case of what is effectively the engine of revolution in modern Iranian history, the middle class, the distinction between the two sections that determined the course of the revolutions in 1905, 1953 and 1979 is quickly collapsing. Around 80 percent of Iran’s young population, who constitute the vast majority of a society with an average age of around 30, do not consider themselves religious, read more secular books than religious ones and do not regularly attend mosque. As the quote I used to describe the situation of students and the middle class intelligentsia illustrates, the situation of the Islamic Republic regarding this class is likely to get worse and worse.

Two pathways seem to open up, on the one hand the possibility that the potential relief of sanctions takes further hold and

---

the economy opens up, on the other it doesn’t. In either case, it is difficult to see how the Islamic Republic can refortify its hold over this class, that has proved itself to be, if not the grave diggers, then the funeral organisers of three Iranian regimes. The strategy of the regime has been to make the best offer it can, short of an individual with the charisma of a Khomeini to wed this social class to the system. The Islamic Republic presents ISIS as an ahistoric force of reaction across the region, and itself as the defence force against it. This can be seen in the way that the regime describes pro ISIS elements as *kharijite*, ascribing to them a heretical form of Islam extrinsic to the spiritual life of the Shia. Whilst this may seem bizarre to Western readers, such readers should be aware that they are not the intended audience of this position.

In fact, for an Iranian audience, this makes absolute sense. Since its inception, taking into account an ultra-Islamist moment here and there, the Islamic Republic has sought to position itself as the successor of Iranian nationalism and left populism as much as the inheritor of the tradition of Islamic anti-imperialism. At the same time, it should be born in mind that the Iranian regime describes ISIS as a creature created by the Americans as well as religiously heretical.\(^{39}\) This description of ISIS as both a ‘backwards’ kind of Islam, and one that is in league with international imperialism is easily identifiable as the direct opposite of the vision of Islam that motivated the cadres of the Islamic Republican Party, the fiery, numerous and volatile traditional lower middle class and petty property owning classes.\(^{40}\)

Once more, the cultural expressions of class political interests that lack a legitimate and legal avenue of expression tell us a lot about the situation. Just as in the times of Gav or Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the Iranian film industry provides a thermometer of the dissent of the educated middle classes, and the reading is not healthy. Where around the 2009 uprising famous artists such as Kiarostami the director were giving interviews to *Voice of America* and demanding the fall of the regime, the Fajr International Festival of Film and Art, has in recent years, featured artists dedicating their awards to the supposed heroes of the

Iranian ‘resistance’ in Syria.\(^1\) It is important to remember that these same sorts of artists, leading film makers like Jafar Panahi and Abbas Kiarostami, were supporting the Green Movement in 2009.

At the same time, the middle class is being sold a version of the story of the ‘resistance’ in Syria which is broadened, to appeal to the sections of the other social classes that participated within the green movement. Famously, Khamenei has never had the personal charisma to provide anything like the charismatic leadership that Khomeini gave so easily. Indeed, his personal ability to operate at the top of Iranian politics can be called into question when we recall both Rafsanjani’s hand in installing him, and the disastrous consequences, in terms of political hegemony and personal popularity, of him backing Ahmadinejad to the hilt, only to see him be condemned by the pro-Khamenei factions as a ‘deviant’.\(^2\) It is difficult to see who, from the immediate coterie of ayatollahs and politicians could get anyway near this function. In a specific way, Qasem Solaymani is beginning to play this role.

Qasem Solaymani has been repositioned within the Iranian national consciousness, after first coming to prominence for cosigning the letter that threatened a military coup, should President Khatami not crack down on students protests, that led to the attacks and brutality that triggered the 1999 student uprising. Through the alleged ‘war against ISIS’ that has been waged in Syria and Iraq, he has been positioned as a national hero, someone who can appeal to the worse off social classes; the poorer middle class, the working classes and the urban poor. He has been transformed from a “secretive commander to national celebrity”.\(^3\) Interestingly, a number of the points of his life story, as told by the Iranian media seem to correlate to ones from Khomeini’s (however true or otherwise they may have been in the case of Khomeini); from his poor and oppressed upbringing to his utter and complete nationalistic dedication.\(^4\)

\(^{1}\) bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27883162
\(^{2}\) theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/20/mahmoud-ahmadinejad-deviant-president-editorial
\(^{3}\) middleeasteye.net/columns/general-soleimani-storms-iranian-national-consciousness-927310364
\(^{4}\) Certainly historians like Ervand Abrahamian and Baqer Moin, have deconstructed the idea that Khomeini came from a ‘poor’ clerical family. Actually his family were substantial landowners.
The cross-class nature of this developing personality cult is obvious from the myriad of organisational forms it takes. At the same time that the artistic heroes of the university educated classes dedicate cinema awards to him, a nation wide ‘solidarity fund with the people of Syria’ has been created. This organisation, with its roots into neighbourhood Islamic centres in poor areas, is looking to tap into the same social forces that allowed the Khomeinists to mobilise a section of the urban poor in the early period of the revolution.

But there are differences with the form of personality cult being built around Soleymani, certainly with regard to the one built around Khomeini. If we can think of Khomeini as figure similar to Lacan’s conception of the imaginary father, we can see Solaymani as one more like the ‘symbolic father’. Illustratively, the pronouncements of Solaymani on internal Iranian questions, since the development of the Syrian situation have been minimal. Rather, he serves as a figure that sits underneath and guarantees the contours of what constitutes legitimate (from the regime’s point of view) discourse. As we have seen, the Green Movement represented a bursting forth of those social classes, who could no longer see themselves in the image of the ‘Iranian people’, the popular, that the regime sold them. As Lacan says it is only the name-of-the-father (that is, more or less, the father in the symbolic) which can counteract the “cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds”.

We can see this at work in the lack of tacky merchandise that generally follow in the path of any great Iranian personality cults. No wall clocks or poor quality machine woven rugs with the face of General Soleymani, he is far away, indeed over there, to be spoken of in hushed terms, supporting our very ability to speak over here.

The Poverty of the Response of the Iranian Opposition

As is well known, the Iranian opposition contains two currents, one that works with foreign imperialism, takes on a neo-colonial character and sometimes even argues for invasion and military

---

invasions by the Americans and others. At the same time, there is a large and principled opposition, with some links inside the country, and in internal opposition who will, on principle (correctly in the view of the present author) have absolutely no truck with these types.

The record of the non imperialist dependent opposition, in the case of Syria has been absolutely abysmal. The left opposition groups, have almost unanimously failed to support the movement for democracy in Syria, other than in supporting the YPG in Rojava during their war against ISIS, a position which, somewhat bizarrely briefly lined them up on the same side as the Islamic Republic. Indeed, in a personal conversation I was informed that the remaining Iranian PJAK fighters (members of the same international organisation as the PKK) were in the bizarre position of being stopped in Iraq by the Bazarni administration, who as friends of Iran routinely police their movements, when they were trying to cross to Syria to participate in an armed conflict with the same apparently strategic enemy as Soleymani and the Iranian regime. But other than these peculiarities, the Iranian left, both inside and outside the country, have followed the European and global allies in the left movement. Statements condemning, for instance, the ‘murderous Free Syrian Army’ in the same breath of al-Qa’ida, ISIS and Assad, for instance, are typical, even when they come from groups whose heroic and consistent work in support of the legitimate right of the working class in Iran and the region should be recognised.

At the same time, the traditional organs of the lower middle classes, like the National Religious Movement, who exist in a very complex relationship to both legality in the country and other opposition movements like the Green Movement, have been mostly silent. They speak in general terms about the need for peace, friendship and security in the region, and push for better relations between Iran and America, ignoring the fact that such relations are, to some extent, liable to come about through the shared interests of Iran and the major imperialist powers in

47. cpgb.org.uk/pages/news/9/iran-tribunal-impossible-to-continue-support/
crushing the Syrian Revolution.\textsuperscript{49} To paraphrase Walter Benjamin; when friendship and peace are talked about in the abstract, the smell of blood is not far away.

What this position refuses to grapple with is that the ideological structure of the Iranian regimes’ renewed hold on its people depends on the figure of Solaymani as great victor and symbolic father in Syria. The fact of the matter is that, since the Green movement, Iran is going through a security atmosphere unseen since the last Shah’s middle period. The only way the regime can remould its legitimacy is by presenting itself as the defender of a people already wary of religious violence and obscurantism, against a much more violent form of the same. While the reformist and left currents of the democratic movement are right to argue against all sanctions and military threats against the country, they need to argue this in tandem with a policy of solidarity with the democratic movement in Syria. Not to do so is to hand victory to the regime and the imperialists. It is no coincidence that the Americans removed the personal sanctions against Soleymani, whilst ones crucial to the economic lives of everyday Iranians are still in place.

This refusal to engage with the Syrian revolution has meant that the only voices urging support within the Persian speaking political sphere are those more or less directly tied to American Imperialism. The Sorry Syria campaign features the same kind of figures that one sees on Voice of America Persian language programming, such as (the undoubtedly funny) Kambiz Hosseini. This is to say nothing of the work done by American funded organisations. The problem with this is twofold. On the one hand, Iranians will never support this \textit{en masse}. National independence is one of the most cherished outcomes of the revolution of 1979 and is held dear by Iranian of almost all classes, apart from a smattering of reactionary exiles.\textsuperscript{50} On the other hand, the silence of the democratic movement in Iran plays into the hands of the regime, insofar as it provides evidence that only external enemies stand for the victory of the Syrian revolution, and weds the democratic classes to their undemocratic masters.

\textsuperscript{49} melimazhabi.com/
\textsuperscript{50} Michael Axworthy, \textit{Revolutionary Iran}, Penguin, 2013.
Throughout the three great revolutionary movements in Iran in the twentieth century the scene was constantly set by a liberalisation from above: whether in the case of the constitutional movement, the movement for the nationalisation of oil or the great revolution of 1979. The Green Movement was different. It came on the back of the failure of a regime to implement its plans, rather than a brief moment of liberalisation. Crucially, the imago of the Islamic Republic collapsed. If the Iranian imperialist intervention in Syria is defeated, a similar crisis will prevail, and figures like Solemani will go back to what they made their names doing—arguing for a military coup against the reformists and throwing students from dorm room windows: “how can the Name-of-the-Father be summoned by the subject to the only place from which it could have come into being for him and in which it has never been? By nothing other than a real father”. The Syrian and Iranian democratic movements share an interest in bringing these contradictions back to the real of internal political contradictions.

The Syrian adventure has allowed the Iranian regime to turn its own contradictions outwards, to transmute the undelivered ‘national independence, equality and freedom’ of the slogans of 1979 into the words ‘infantry’, ‘tanks’, and ‘militia’. The victory of the Syrian revolution, and Iranian solidarity with it, is the beginning of an answer; there are no tanks, infantry and militia of the people. The independence, freedom and equality of the Iranian peoples depends on that of the Syrian peoples and vice versa.

These social fissures will sharpen as the Iranian strategy in Syria enters its next phase. As splits have been revealed between the Iranian and Russian positions on Assad’s personal survival—with even some of the Iranian establishment appearing to disagree on this—the regime seems intent on carving out a permanent zone of influence, supported by IRGC soldiers, sectarian militias and mercenaries, that will exist with or without the Assad family.

53. japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/11/04/world/unlike-iran-russia-may-open-assads-exit/#.VkH1A4SZ5p8
At the same time we can see that the contradictions that led to the Green Movement have grown sharper under the Rouhani administration. The re-emergence of a workers and student’s movement, even one which is explicitly socialist in places, has forced the regime to resurrect old myths about ‘West toxified’ intellectuals, and naive workers being ‘controlled’ by foreign powers: “If there is any truth in the rebirth of a Marxist movement in our universities, there is for sure some American funding to support it, and it is to divide our students”, Khamenei has reportedly said.  

The shape of contemporary repression reveals the regime’s inability to escape the looping narratives of its father’s history. Whilst the suspicious deaths of a number of human rights and trade union activists have been piling up, the internationally famous Shahrokh Zamani has died in the same prison (Gohar Dash) that was the seat of the tortures and massacres of the 80s. Similarly, the official and reformist press have resurrected some of the crassest anti-leftists slurs of the early Islamic Republic and late Pahlavi Monarchy. From referring to Fedayeen founder and intellectual Bijan Jazani as a ‘terrorist’, to going so far as to rebroadcast the forced confessions of the final leadership of the Tudeh party, after their brutal torture. With a blood drenched sense of double meaning, Khamenei has said that “the students should learn these lessons”.  

Saeed Hajjarian’s response to this has been, as usual, perceptive and persuasive. For him, “Rouhani’s mission has never been ‘democratisation’, but ‘normalisation’. In this way the regime’s Syrian adventure is hitting the same challenges as it hits internally. Just as Rouhani, the Louis to Khatami’s Napoleon, has to struggle to restore just enough rule of law in Iran to ‘normalise’ the internal political situation, so Iran’s role in Syria is likely to need a medium term ‘normalisation’.  

Unfortunately, the genuine reformist and left movements, Hajjarian included, are not able, or not willing, to articulate this in the context of its ideological parallel with the normalisation of the occupation of Syria. If this could happen it may yet begin to throw open the same opportunities for the dissemination of leftist ideas among the working and oppressed classes, which

54. alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/10/26/reading-hayek-in-tehran
55. Ibid.
came after the post-revolutionary uprisings we have looked at here.

More to the point, the return to Iran of the spirit it gave to the region in 2009, is dependant on the success of that same spirit in Syria. For democracy to come to Iran, the Iranian movement must resist the ‘normalisation’ of the situation in Syria.

To say *Tahya Souriyeh*, is to say *Payandeh Iran*. 
Joseph Daher: Interview With Shiar Neyo

Translation from Arabic to English: Saroujah Sakran. Original article in Arabic: syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2014/04/02/

Shiar Neyo is a Syrian journalist and activist of Kurdish descent who has lived in exile for around a decade. In this interview, Shiar talks to us about the relationship between Syrian-Kurdish forces and other Syrian opposition groups, both before and after the revolution; about the thorny relationship between Kurdish activists and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and other pressing Kurdish questions that have become more urgent that ever.

Joseph Daher: Let’s start with your involvement with the Qamishli uprising in 2004 and the Syrian revolution that began in 2011. Why did you participate in them and what was your role?

Shiar Neyo: I cannot really say that I participated in either of them, to be honest, because I was outside Syria and could not go back, due to being a refugee and wanted by the (Syrian) security apparatus. My role was limited to supporting some activists inside Syria with secure communications, setting up and managing some websites and, from time to time, writing and editing news under various pseudonyms—all by virtue of my modest experience in these things. Of course I also participated in demonstrations and events abroad in support of the Qamishli uprising and the Syrian revolution, like many Syrians in exile.

As to why, well, I don’t think any activist or intellectual who really believes in the revolutionary slogans they pronounce could not participate in popular movements of this kind; movements that Syrians have been dreaming of for decades. I know many leftist activists and intellectuals who distanced themselves from both movements under the pretexts of violence, militarisation,
the growing influence of reactionary forces, and other flimsy excuses. One can only say to these people and their likes that the world is more complicated than your idealistic notions of socio-political change, and if you don’t get involved in major events like these and leave the arena to others, you only have yourselves to blame if the ultimate outcome is not to your liking.

**Joseph Daher**: Can you tell us more about the Kurdish uprising of 2004?

**Shiar Neyo**: This is one of of very few occasions that I have agreed to talk about the Qamishli uprising and the Syrian revolution. Because, frankly, I’m rather embarrassed to talk about events that I wasn’t actually involved in. There are many others who are far more worthy and qualified than me to speak about them. So everything I’m going to say reflects my own personal perspective in my capacity as almost an outside observer—even though my family and social connections inside Syria make both of these events more personal.

To me, the Qamishli uprising in 2004 was a classic example of the crystallisation of accumulated frustration and anger against the authority, which erupted spontaneously at an unexpected moment. It was in the same manner that the Syrian revolution kicked off in Daraa in March 2011. Both movements possessed all the essential elements that constitute popular uprisings of this kind, from the crystallisation of long-term social-political-economic suffering in a shocking incident, breaking through the barrier of fear, to a form of tribalism (ethnic, tribal, regional, etc.) that initially helps people stick together and move beyond the ‘national’ rhetoric imposed by the ruling regime as a deterrent or a bridle.

However, the security apparatus and the army, along with a number of mercenaries from local Arab tribes, succeeded—unfortunately—in quickly extinguishing the Qamishli uprising by resorting to extreme and widespread violence, killing, detaining and terrorising thousands of people. But the regime would not have been able to succeed in this were it not for the cowardice of the Syrian-Kurdish political parties, who did their best, with the collusion of the security apparatus, to calm people down; and were it not for the impotence of the ‘Arab’ Syrian opposition factions and their hesitation to support the movement as a legitimate Syrian popular political uprising. Indeed, many Syrian
intellectuals and activists condemned the uprising at the time and levelled various accusations and negative epithets at it, such as ‘violence’, ‘treason’, ‘separatism’, ‘racism’ and so on. Ironically, some of these same activists and intellectuals are today blaming European and international leftists for their lack of support for the Syrian revolution under similar pretexts: ‘stability’, ‘resistance’, ‘anti-imperialism’, ‘the Islamist spectre’ (which is similar, to some extent, to the Kurdish bogeyman) and so on.

**Joseph Daher:** Let us elaborate further on this point. How do you view the position of the Syrian opposition on the Kurdish issue?

**Shiar Neyo:** First allow me to emphasise that I don’t believe that there is one single Syrian opposition but many, just as there are many Kurdish issues that may vary depending on your moral and political position vis-a-vis these issues, from believing it’s merely about cultural and democratic rights to acknowledging or denying the right of Syrian-Kurds to self-determination.

To me, and to many Syrian-Kurds, this position that I have just talked about (the position of many Syrian-Arab dissidents and intellectuals on the Qamishli uprising) summarises their historical complex towards the ‘Kurdish Issue’: on one hand, they insist that Kurdish political forces should work within a ‘unified’ national framework but, on the other, they don’t make any effort to re-constitute this framework so as to include and guarantee the national rights and demands of Kurds and other minorities in Syria. Of course I’m speaking here of tangible political and economic rights and demands, not symbolic, generic, rubber-like slogans.

The least that can be said of this position is that it is double-standard and opportunistic. But the problem runs much deeper than that, in my opinion. It seems to me that the problem lies in the inability of these Arab-nationalists to imagine an inclusive national identity based on diversity that is neither reductionist nor assimilationist. Of course the Ba’ath Party’s policy towards the Kurds (from oppression and discrimination, coupled with obfuscation and semi-complete ignorance about anything Kurdish, as well as the closure of all public spaces of debate and dialogue that could have countered this ignorance) played a big role in the deepening of this Arab-Kurdish rift. But we cannot blame the Ba’athists for everything. The position of many Arab-national-
ists, who consider themselves ‘progressive’, on Kurdish issues in Syria is no less chauvinistic.

We can add to these factors the insularity of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria, since the 1950’s at least, and their inability to imagine forms of struggle other than one closed off on itself, so to speak. This phenomenon has complicated historical causes that can be observed in many national liberation movements across the world.

This chasm between the Syrian Kurdish and Arab oppositions began to subside to some extent after a number of Syrian-Kurdish political parties—particularly Yeketi and Azadi—opened up to some of the ‘Arab’ opposition factions and started to participate in their events and meetings, notably under the framework of the so-called Damascus Declaration. However, this was a partial and largely pragmatic opening, in my view, as evidenced later, after the revolution broke out, by the fundamental differences between the two sides within opposition groupings regarding the name of the Syrian Republic, for example, (whether or to include ‘Arab’ in the name), or how to define Kurdish rights... and many other disputes of this kind.

A much more important process, in my opinion, in this regard was the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, in all that it meant for Syrians regarding a re-discovery of themselves and a discovery of the others who ostensibly shared this ‘homeland’ with them yet they did not know anything about them. The revolution meant the reconstruction of a Syrian national identity that is more colourful and diverse and less exclusionary. It was very significant, for example, that protesters in Kurdish and Arab areas raised slogans and banners and placards carrying messages of mutual support and solidarity. Like the slogans carried by protesters in Amuda and Qamishli and other Kurdish-majority towns in solidarity with Deraa, Homs, Aleppo and other places. Or the banners raised by protesters in Idlib, Aleppo, Homs and elsewhere expressing solidarity with Amuda and Qamishli and other predominantly Kurdish areas; banners and placards congratulating their Kurdish comrades during the latter’s national festive occasions, or consoling them during their ‘special’ tragedies (such as the assassination of Mesh’al Tammo). This phenomenon can be read from the perspective that I spoke about earlier (the building of a new national identity) and not merely as an expression of
symbolic, mutual solidarity as a matter of reciprocation or sharing in the sense of victimhood.

However, it seems this radical, creative process has not yet had an impact on the established Syrian opposition groups—both Kurdish and Arab—which remain captive to their outdated identities and rhetoric.

Joseph Daher: How has the situation in Kurdish areas developed since the start of the revolution? How has the Assad regime dealt with the popular movement in these areas? What is the relationship between the various Kurdish groups and Syrian revolutionaries, the Free Syrian Army, the Islamist forces, etc.?

Shiar Neyo: Many accuse the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian wing of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), of collusion and co-operation with the regime. I don’t believe this narrative is very accurate. What happened, in my reading of events, was a pragmatic convergence of interests between the two sides in 2012.

For the regime, the primary aim of this ‘understanding’ (i.e. the withdrawal of the regime apparatus from the predominantly Kurdish areas and handing their administration over mainly to the PYD) was the neutralisation of the Kurdish areas in the revolution, both militarily and politically (so as to not open up another major front in the north-eastern part of the country and to divide the opposition along ethnic and sectarian lines). The second aim was to use the PYD as a trump card against Turkey, the most significant supporter of the the Free Syrian Army at that time, in the hope of brokering a future deal with Turkey like the one in which the Syrian regime sold Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. And it appears the regime has failed in some of these aims and succeeded in others, for complicated and intertwined reasons that we cannot really go into here.

From the PYD’s point of view, this was a golden opportunity to impose its authority and expand its sphere of influence in the Kurdish areas in Syria. This political pragmatism and thirst for power are two important factors in understanding the party’s dealings with the regime, the revolution, the FSA, and even the Kurds themselves. They also help explain many phenomena that seem to bewilder some commentators and analysts, such as the suppression by PYD forces of independent activists and those critical of the party’s policies, in much the same vein as
the Ba’athist regime did. By way of example, one can cite in this regard the Amuda massacre in July 2013, in which the People’s Protection Units (YPG) opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, or the closure of the new independent radio station Arta in February 2014, under the pretext that it was not ‘licensed’. The PYD’s forces have also assaulted members of other Kurdish political parties and arrested some of them under a variety of excuses; they have been controlling food and financial resources in the Kurdish areas and distributing them in an unjust manner on the basis of partisan favouritism, and so on and so forth. Such practises remind people, rightly, of the oppressive practises of the Assad regime.

After armed Islamist factions—the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat Al-Nusra in particular—started to attack Kurdish areas in mid-2013, igniting a war that continues unabated between them and the PYD forces, many Syrian-Kurds started to change their position towards the PYD and the YPG forces that it dominates.

The Islamist factions are fighting this battle under an Islamist banner some times and under an Arabist banner at others. But the real engine behind them is the Turkish government, the arch-enemy of the Kurds, in addition to the strategic position of these regions on the Turkish and Iraqi borders, as well as their richness in oil. The combination of these factors has pushed many Kurdish-Syrians to accepting the PYD’s authority out of self-defence or out of fear that the radical Islamists might win and subsequently impose their rule and their values that are alien to the local population, like what happened in al-Raqqa. In addition to all this, Syrian-Kurds on the whole are less religious and less religiously extreme than a lot of other Syrian social groups. Despite everything else, the PYD continues to talk about secularism, democracy, women’s rights, etc. Even those most critical of the party started to see it as the ‘lesser of two evils’. I know many Kurdish activists in Qamishli, Amuda and other areas who, before these developments, used to organise demonstrations and write against the PYD, but have now suddenly started volunteering in the ranks of the YPG, which is largely controlled by the PYD, to fight against the Islamists for the reasons previously mentioned.

This change in the attitude of many Syrian-Kurds towards the PYD was bolstered by the double-standard position of the
Interview with Shiar Neyo

Syrian opposition, particularly the National Coalition and the Islamist factions, towards the ISIS, even after the FSA declared a war against it. While many opposition pages and websites overflow with critiques of ISIS and lampooning their practises, when it came to the fighting between the ISIS and the PYD forces and their allies in the Kurdish areas, the ISIS suddenly transformed into ‘the Free Syrian Army’ and the entire talk became about a conflict between ‘the opposition forces’ and ‘the separatist Kurds’.

I personally do not believe that such mistakes are always intentional. They are, for the most part, the result of the Kurdish bogeyman and the inability to imagine a non-exclusionary national identity. I have already touched upon both points. It is my belief that, if the performance and rhetoric of the Syrian opposition factions does not improve as far as Kurdish issues are concerned—radically and meaningfully, and not in terms of dubious pragmatism—it will only lead to the strengthening of the PYD in Kurdish areas, both at the expense of other Kurdish popular revolutionary forces and at the expense of any hope in one Syrian homeland for all.


Shiar Neyo: As I have already said, the practises of the party, both past and present, recall the practises of the Assad regime and others oppressive, totalitarian regimes like it. And it is a resemblance that has objective reasons. The PKK is a nationalist party that is highly ideological and based on a strict military regime and blind loyalty, as well as the apotheosis of the leader and the notion of one party that leads society and the state. In this sense, the PKK is not very different to many Arab leftist parties that have been riddled with these Stalinist-Leninist plagues.

As for the experience of self-governance, we first have to distinguish between the aspirations and rights of a group in seeking independence and autonomy and between a specific model that claims to embody these aspirations and rights in practice. So if we are talking about the right of Syrian-Kurds to autonomy and self-determination—provided that this is what they desire—then, of course, I support this right, as should anyone who claims to be a leftist or progressive. Anyone who says otherwise is either
a hypocrite or a fascist. I am personally against nation-states and states in general. However, if a group of people, or a majority of them, aspire or seek some aim—regardless of whether or not I agree with it—or if a nation-state was the only possible framework that can currently achieve greater freedom and justice for them, then of course I support these aspirations and endeavours.

But if we are talking about the PYD’s current project in the Syrian-Kurdish regions, then the matter becomes more complicated. On one hand, it seems that the experience has begun to achieve commendable gains, such as secular management of the state apparatus, ensuring greater rights for women and the participation of minorities in administration, a greater participation and more agency for the local population in the management of their affairs, especially with the absence of a strong, established state. And we should remember here that the PYD is leaning against a rich experience of self-governance that their comrades in Turkish Kurdistan have been living through.

On the other hand, however, the experiment may well end with the strengthening of the PYD’s dominance and the increase of oppression in the name of protecting these gains, along with their gradual squandering in return for narrow political interests. This is a real and possible danger.

I imagine that, if I were living in one of the three Kurdish cantons that are currently under the rule of the self-governance administration, I would have participated in the experiment in one form or another, but I would have tried as much as possible to work with other activists and actors in order to save it from the dangers that I’ve just mentioned.

**Joseph Daher:** Do you think it is possible to build a Third Force, that is democratic and progressive and guarantees the fulfillment of the original goals of the revolution, and that is independent from the regime and the backward Islamist forces?

**Shiar Neyo:** I don’t really like the label ‘Third Force’, which is being used to describe Syrian-Kurdish forces or the PYD to distinguish them from both the regime and the ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamist’ opposition. Because the label assumes, or imposes, the homogeneity of Kurdish forces and the unity of their aspirations, just as it assumes the homogeneity of the opposition factions.

In any case, I believe that what has been happening in the Kurdish regions—despite all my reservations and criticisms of
the PYD—is a step forward if we are to compare it to the other alternatives that could have dominated the region (the regime or the radical Islamists). But I do not think that the PYD and the PKK are the right political carriers that are capable of achieving true freedom, democracy and social justice, which are being sought by many in Syria.

I do not doubt for a moment that the PYD—if things carried on like this—will re-produce an oppressive, totalitarian regime, just as what the Ba’ath party or the two ruling parties in Iraqi Kurdistan did—bearing in mind the differences in their experiences, of course. The same applies to many of the other Syrian opposition factions, from the radical Islamist forces to the nationalist leftist parties that lean towards fascism. The hope is that the revolutionary movement will continue and give birth to different forms of organisation and self-organisation, and to new structures that are more consistent with the original values and goals of the revolution.

But as long as blind violence continues (mainly from the regime and its supporters), and as long as leftists continue to focus their energies on civil society activities and leave the arena of political and armed struggle to others, the chances of fulfilling these hopes become weaker and weaker. Of course, it is not easy, after all that has been happened, to go back to the days of the absence of democracy and freedoms, at least in the short term. But the achievement of true social justice is a whole other matter.
In early March of this year, about 6,000 smuggled photographs of torture victims in Syrian regime jails were leaked on the internet and published on various web sites. The eyes of parents, siblings, partners and relatives of Syrian detainees became transfixed on their screens. Sorting through pictures of hardly-recognisable corpses, they wondered if they might find a trace of their loved ones.

Known as the ‘Caesar’ photographs, in reference to the pseudonym of the defected Syrian sergeant and forensic photographer who smuggled the images out of Syria, the photographs inevitably lead us to question the morality and ethics of disseminating graphic portrayals of dead bodies on the internet.\(^1\) Important as it is, however, any normative debate in this case would sound almost preposterous and a form of intellectual temerity once we realise that what those pictures revealed was the tragic fate of at

1. syriangavroche.com/2015/06/blog-post.html
least tens of prisoners whose destination had been unknown for months or even years. It is, without a doubt, unspeakably painful to first learn about the fate of a son, husband, or sister through a leaked photograph on the internet. Yet for those who spent months and perhaps years begging prison guards and intelligence officers for a scrap of information about their detainees, for those who were repeatedly blackmailed by informants throughout the search, for those who waited in vain and oscillated between hope and despair, for them, these images, harrowing as they were, represented a rescue from endless nights of waiting, releasing them from the indefinite confinement of the shackles of hope.

More ‘fortunate’ Syrians learn about their family members’ death under torture through a phone call made by security services, one in which they are told to come and pick up the identification and any personal possessions the deceased has left behind. Victims’ bodies are not delivered back to the family for proper burial, the official cause of the death remains ‘unknown’, and people are deprived even of the right to mourn their dead or clutch at the physical evidence of their loss.

But with hundreds of thousands of imprisoned and forcibly ‘disappeared’ Syrians, many do not have the ‘privilege’ of learning about the death of their loved ones first-hand. They are either forced to wait and hope, or be left to the mercy of serendipity and, as happened with the Caesar photographs, find out about their death through a leaked image of the corpse.

Since the publication of the leaked torture photos in early March, tens of victims were identified by their families. Those included at least 65 photos of Palestinian refugee victims recognised either by their families or by activists. The names of these victims were documented by the Action Group for Palestinians in Syria in April. The London-based monitoring group, tasked with documenting human rights violations inflicted upon Syria’s Palestinians, had published a report earlier in March entitled ‘Photos Massacre’ that listed the names of 39 Palestinian victims of torture and forced disappearance. Their corpses were identified through the leaked images.

2. actionpal.org.uk/en/post.php?id=981
One of the most widely circulated photos was that of a corpse, apparently belonging to a Palestinian refugee, with a tattoo of the map of Palestine emblazoned with the colors of the Palestinian flag. Attached to the corpse, a scrap of paper displaying the torture victim’s number—the coup de grâce toward the obliteration of personhood in Syria’s myriad dungeons.

Being confronted by such a wildly symbolic image, it becomes impossible to not wonder: What if that image belonged to a Pal-
estinian prisoner in Israeli occupation jails? Would Palestinians and pro-Palestinians who currently support the Syrian regime react otherwise if the caption on that picture were altered and if it stated that he was killed in an Israeli prison rather than in a Syrian one? One could be forgiven for assuming that, had this man died in an Israeli jail, his picture would become iconic among Palestinians and supporters of their cause, and would be pointed to over and over again as yet more proof of Israel’s brutality and Palestinian defiance in the face of it.

Yet as it stands, neither the photo of the slain Palestinian prisoner whose arm bore the Palestinian map tattoo, nor the photos of tens of Palestinians killed under torture in Syrian regime jails have caused outrage or defiance in Palestine or among Palestinian solidarity activists. They were not killed by ISIS or the Israeli occupation, but by the Syrian regime that still enjoys the support of large segments of Palestinian political factions, public opinion, and many left-wing circles associated with the Palestinian cause. And therefore, Palestinian victims of the Syrian regime had the misfortune of falling to the ‘wrong perpetrator’. It is precisely the identity of the perpetrator that deems the images of Palestinian torture victims in Syria invisible, changes their status from revered martyrs and heroes to contested numbers, and renders their plight unworthy of our solidarity.

Since the eruption of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, more than 400 Palestinian-Syrians have been killed under torture in Syrian regime jails. When this fact is presented to Palestinians who support the Syrian regime, some of them dispute it, some have the audacity to dispute it and claim that those mostly innocent civilians and peaceful activists were actually killed by ISIS or Nusra front. Others say simply that, “Now is not the time; there are more important things to talk about”. For them, those thousands of Palestinians who have been either killed, imprisoned, or displaced by the Syrian regime are a superfluous group that needs to be dislodged, overlooked and sacrificed for a ‘greater cause’—that is, the liberation of Palestine—as if the liberation of Palestine means anything when Palestinians in a neighboring country die in their thousands while we look away.

Thus, when we affirm that our freedom and dignity as Palestinians cannot come at the expense of others, including our

4. budourhassan.wordpress.com/tag/syrian-revolution/
fellow Palestinians, we are described as naïve. They ask that we regard the deaths of fellow Palestinians at the hands of the Syrian regime and the siege, destruction and shelling of their camps as little more than minutiae that must be shrugged off for far more significant geopolitical considerations. Hassan Nasrallah says that the road to Jerusalem goes through Syria. The revered resistance leader must know what he’s talking about.

Little does it matter that this road is paved by the blood of hundreds of thousands of Syrians; little does it matter that taking this road means treading upon the dignity and rights of a people who have historically supported our cause like no other—and not thanks to the regime but in spite of it. It doesn’t even matter that Hassan Nasrallah’s road is filled with the corpses of Palestinians killed by the regime or that his compass is directed towards perpetuating oppression and monopolising resistance.

One has to be pragmatic, they tell us, and we do not have the luxury of choosing our allies according to our ideological convictions. This is used to justify siding with and cheering on the Syrian and Iranian regimes and Hezbollah, just as it was used in the 1980s to support Saddam Hussein. “He scared the hell out of Israel!” they told us. This was supposed to be sufficient to make us overlook the fact that he gassed thousands of Kurds to death or that he committed unspeakable atrocities in Kuwait. Just as we are today being asked to overlook the suffering of Syrians and Palestinians at the hands of the Syrian regime for the purported ‘greater cause’, we were being encouraged to chant for Saddam and hang his pictures on the wall. He too, they said, was an enemy to Israel.

One of the many problems with this approach is that we only apply it to ourselves. We express our indignation if another oppressed people strikes an alliance with the US or Israel—we delegitimise an entire people’s uprising base on the fact that they received funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. (Incidentally, this was the very same Qatar that the ‘resistance’ showered with gratitude not so long ago.) We hypocritically deny them the very same pragmatism that we adopt to rationalise our support of oppressive regimes. We fail to understand that for Zabadani’s Syrians, Iran and Hezbollah are occupying forces trying to uproot and ethnically cleanse them, precisely the way Israel has been do-

5. youtube.com/watch?v=WcXW9AbMS3c
We fail to understand that the Syrian regime and its allies have become to them what Israel and the United States have been to us. And so we do not take a minute to put ourselves in the shoes of Syrian resistance fighters in Zabadani who, for two months, have somehow thwarted a far superior military force, backed by non-stop aerial bombardment.

If we continue to believe that Hassan Nasrallah’s road to Palestine is the only one open to us, we do not have the moral ground to condemn those who falsely or misleadingly claim that their road to salvation is through peace with Israel.

Combatting all the no-longer-ulterior agenda to normalise the relations between Syrians and Israel cannot be achieved by supporting Assad and Nasrallah. It starts with explicitly and vehemently refusing that our cause be used to condone the killing, humiliation and subjugation of Syrians. It starts by re-affirming our commitment to Syria’s liberation of all forms of oppression. It starts by realising that our liberation struggle cannot and will not treat Syrians as pawns.

Unfortunately, Palestinians will continue to be killed in Syrian regime jails and so will Syrians; Palestinian camps will continue to suffer under Syrian regime siege and so will Syrian towns and cities. True solidarity with the Syrian people and with Syria’s Palestinians requires us to stand firm in the face of the regime that carries prime responsibility for this. And for once, our solidarity must be principled rather than selective. It has to be based on the universal values that the Palestinian liberation struggle and the Syrian revolution are based on. It cannot be modeled on the identity of the oppressor, or dictated by the tone of Hassan Nasrallah’s speeches.
The situation facing the Assad regime is dire. Having lost almost every major battle it has fought with the armed rebels for over a year now, it is facing crises on every front. Since March it has lost control of the entire province of Idlib to the Jaysh Al-Fatah coalition. In Aleppo, the Fatah Halab coalition are on the offensive and gradually liberating districts of the city from the regime, while last month the regime’s only ground supply route to the city was temporarily severed by rebels. In the south the Southern Front continues to pressure the regime around Daraa, and is advancing in Quneitra province, while rebels in Lattakia continue to mount incursions into the regime loyalist province.

Assad is facing a manpower shortage as tens of thousands of Syrians flee regime held areas to escape conscription and deteriorating living conditions. Refugees who left Syria recently

2. alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/5/11/syria-coming-together-to-fight-assad-in-aleppo
3. carnegie-mec.org/2015/07/06/syria-s-last-best-hope-southern-front/id1a
4. theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/syria-approaching-de-facto-partition-amid-assad-military-setbacks
describe being unable to live, as regular electricity and water cuts, and the rising price of food and rents makes the situation unbearable.

Into the breach has stepped Russian imperialism. Russian troops and military equipment have been flooded into regime loyal provinces in Western Syria, through the ports of Lattakia and Tartous. Photos abound on social media of Russian marines posing with pictures of Assad and Putin in regime strongholds. Russian forces have been deployed in cities across Western and central Syria to shore up the regime and defend its hold on key provinces. Now Russian jets are bombing rebel targets across the country. The Russian intervention signals not the strength of the regime, but its weakness. The regime has exhausted its allies and supplies of mercenaries, and now must rely on the troops of its imperial master. A Damascus based diplomat is reported as saying: “The Iranians told the Russians bluntly: if you don’t intervene, Bashar al-Assad will fall, and we are not in a position to keep propping him up”.

The locations the Russian soldiers are deployed to indicates the underlying strategy for the partition of the country, long predicted as the fallback plan for the regime and its backers if it could not defeat the armed rebellion. Official statements that the Russian soldiers would deploy to Damascus, Hama, Homs, Latakia but not to Deir Ezzour or Aleppo show the regime is reinforcing its control over Syria’s central region, and has no intention of trying to recapture Eastern Syria. The targeting of ISIS free areas of Homs and Idlib by Russian jets shows that Putin’s intervention is aimed squarely at the rebels, not at ISIS.

Despite what some analysts heralded as a dangerous step towards a third world war, Russia’s intervention has come with the tacit approval of the US. In advance of the Russian military deployment and bombing both the US and Germany agreed to withdraw their patriot missile batteries from Turkey’s border.

6. twitter.com/ibra_joudeh/status/640147122235514880
7. twitter.com/TheStudyofWar/status/648325703138734080
9. theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/syrian-military-weakness-russian-intervention
10. mebriefing.com/?p=1679
Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up?

with Syria. And American officials have publicly stated that Russia’s military deployments have Obama’s approval, as long as they only attack ISIS.

Having long attempted to bring about the rebels’ defeat by depriving them of weapon’s and support, the US government is now letting Russia’s military intervene unopposed to try and finish them off. The rebels are aware of this, and their feelings were expressed by FSA Brigadier General Ahmad Rahal—the first general to defect from the Syrian navy—who described the situation as follows:

When FSA liberated almost half of Syria in mid of 2012, Hezbollah militias were involved to fight the revolution. Hezbollah lost its main leadership with his lion (Assad) when the revolution regained its balance. Then, Qassem Sulaymani was involved with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to fight the revolution… When Suleymani and his tiger (Suheil Al Hassan) lost with the liberation of Idlib, Sahl Al Ghab and Abu Dhuhur, they became worried and called in the Russian bear… I believe probably and I am not wrong to say in case the capital is besieged and the Presidential Palace is threatened, Americans marines will be involved to fight the revolution.

Partition and Ethnic Cleansing

The regime must rely on partition and ethnic cleansing to maintain its rule because it has so thoroughly lost the support of the vast majority of the populace. At its height in the spring of 2013 the rebellion controlled 60 percent of Syria’s territory, but only 30 percent of the population lived in opposition controlled areas. This was a result of regime strategy, and the human geography of Syria. The most populous cities lie in Western Syria, and here the regime concentrated its forces in order to maintain control. In mid-2012 under pressure from the growing rebellion, the regime pulled back from outlying areas, ceding control of the North East to the PYD, abandoning the East of the country ex-

12. alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/9/30/us-agrees-to-conditional-russian-deployment-in-syria
13. syriaupdate.wordpress.com/2012/08/18/brigadier-general-ahmad-rahal-defects-and-joins-the-fsa/
except for Deir Ezzour City and withdrawing from many smaller towns to reinforce Damascus and the provincial capitals in the West.

This strategy allowed it to hold out in well fortified positions against the more numerous but poorly armed rebels, until help arrived in the shape of Hezbollah and Iranian intervention. Once the regime had consolidated its positions, it went on the offensive. The rebels, overstretched and poorly armed had their supply lines cut and were driven back from their many fronts with the regime by Hezbollah and IRGC shocktroops. The turning point was the loss of the town of Qusayr in June 2013, a key supply route for the rebels from Lebanon. This began a long string of defeats which lasted until early 2014.14

As the defeats mounted, rebels retreated to strongholds in their local neighbourhoods, villages and towns. They were systematically cut off, besieged, shelled and starved into submission.15 Whole towns and neighbourhoods were simply wiped off the map by the regime,16 displacing hundreds of thousands and causing the huge refugee exodus from Syria throughout 2013-2014. Larger towns like Moadamiyah17, Barzeh18 and Qaboun19 which were too big to conquer easily were subject to brutal sieges until the rebels agreed to hand over their heavy weapons.20 Partially disarmed they were then neutralised as a threat, although the regime maintained the torment by tightening the sieges and occasionally shelling the towns21 in violation of the truce, usually as punishment for rebel victories elsewhere.22

14. theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/05/syria-army-seizes-qusair
16. theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/30/syria-neighbourhoods-residents
17. syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/01/4498/starvation-tactic-leads-truce-moadamiyeh/
18. syriadirect.org/news/in-barzeh-%E2%80%98siege-left-rebels-with-no-choice-but-to-accept-reconciliation%E2%80%99/
19. bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27882197
20. koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140302000148
21. middleeasteye.net/news/besieged-damascus-suburb-shelled-despite-truce-army-1320957138
22. thenational.ae/world/syria/mortar-rounds-slam-into-syrian-school-killing-at-least-13-children
Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up?

These besieged towns and cities are dotted around central Syria. Damascus is still effectively surrounded by opposition held towns, and neighbourhoods; Al-Tal to the north, Tishreen and Qaboun to the north east, by Jobar and the towns of Douma and Irbin in the Eastern Ghouta, to the south by the neighbourhoods of Beit Sahm, Yalda, Babbila, Yarmouk and Hajar Al-Aswad, to the south east by Daraya and Moadamiyah, to the west by Qudsayya and Al-Hammeh and several others in the countryside of the Western Ghouta. These towns and neighbourhoods have hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people residing in them.

A similar situation exists near Homs. The neighbourhood of Al-Waer, north of Homs City, has 500,000 displaced people living within it. Further north in the Homs countryside is a belt of towns and villages still held by the rebels. The towns of Rastan, Talbisah and a-Zafarana in this rebel belt were recently bombed by Russia.

If the regime is to construct a viable rump state which can be defended and serve as its basis for partitioning the country, it will have to eliminate these rebel held towns from the areas it dominates. With the population of these towns numbering into the millions, all of them staunchly opposed to the regime, and the regime being incapable of offering political solutions, the only option for the regime is to starve them into submission and ethnically cleanse them.

This is what the regime is now doing; the sieges are being tightened in an attempt to enforce its rule. Al-Tal—originally a town of 100,000—now shelters up to one million internally displaced people and has been subject to a regime blockade for over 70 days. The residents have run out of supplies of food and medicine, and cannot even bribe regime soldiers to allow goods to enter. Similar blockades have been imposed since mid-summer on most of the towns surrounding Damascus.

25. syriadirect.org/news/blockaded-daraya-residents-prepare-for-winter%D5s-chill-amidst-ongoing-bombardment/
Some of these towns have given up in response to the terrible conditions. In mid-August rebels in the town of Hafir Alfoka handed themselves into the regime, with their fighters to be integrated into pro-regime paramilitary organisations. In exchange, food supplies and medicine are to be allowed to enter the town. The residents of Zabadani refused a similar deal, and so were the victims of the first attempt to clear one of the besieged towns by force.

Zabadani Resists

The conflict around Zabadani demonstrates the regime and its backers’ long term strategy for the partition of Syria. Zabadani was a popular resort town in the mountains. Its residents, a mix of Sunnis and Christians, had taken an active part in the revolution. When the revolt was beaten back in the area in 2013-2014, Zabadani and the surrounding towns were placed under siege.

Lying close to the Lebanese border, and on a crucial supply route, the regime could not tolerate rebel control of the town. During the summer Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and Hezbollah troops backed by artillery and the Syrian air force attempted to take Zabadani and force the rebellious population out. The rebels, all locals to the area, fiercely resisted for over 80 days, while the regime unleashed massive violence on the town. Over 1000 barrel bombs were dropped on Zabadani, while thousands of Hezbollah and IRGC troops attempted to storm it. After weeks with little progress and heavy losses for the regime, the regime shelled and threatened to storm the nearby towns Madaya and Bloudan if they did not hand over the civilians from Zabadani who they were sheltering. Unable to defeat the resistance of the Zabadani rebels, the regime was attempting to kidnap and torture their relatives to break their resolve.

Despite everything the regime and its backers were not able to take Zabadani. Over 80 days they whittled down the rebels to controlling a few hundred square metres of the city centre, but they refused to surrender and 600 vowed to fight to the

27. en.zamanalwsl.net/news/11138.html
28. huffingtonpost.com/faysal-itani/in-zabadani-signs-of-a-ne_b_8097416.html
29. leilashami.wordpress.com/2015/08/29/the-cleansing-of-zabadani/
30. qunfuz.com/2015/09/02/instead-of-freedom-annihilation/
death. In response to the attacks, the Jaysh Al-Fatah rebel coalition stormed the regime loyalist towns of Fuah and Kafraya in Idlib to try and pressure the regime into halting the attack. After JAF’s advance threatened to conquer the towns, Iran offered the rebels a ceasefire and negotiations took place between representatives of Iran, Hezbollah and Jaysh Al-Fatah in Turkey. It is a sign of the regime’s lack of strength and sovereignty that the negotiations included only representatives of Hezbollah, Iranian officials and Jaysh Al-Fatah. No representatives of the regime were involved in the talks.

The initial offer from the Iranian negotiators was for the entire Sunni population of Zabadani to be moved to Idlib province, in exchange for transfer of the Shia populations of Fuah and Kafraya—and the regime troops protecting them—to Damascus. This sectarian population transfer was rejected both by the rebels and the civilian council of Zabadani. They saw in it the beginning of attempts to move the majority Sunni population out of regime controlled areas, dispossessing them and laying the basis for a sectarian partitioning of the country.

Following the rejection, the regime resumed its assault on Zabadani, and Jaysh Al-Fatah again attacked Fuah and Kafraya. With a serious defeat looming for Fuah and Kafraya, Iranian officials again offered a ceasefire, but this time the deal offered was greater: Zabadani’s residents and fighters would be allowed safe passage to Idlib, while a six month ceasefire would apply to the area, and the blockades on rebel held Madaya, Baqeen and Sarghaya would be lifted. In addition, 500 captives were to be released from regime prisons. In return 10,000 civilians would be evacuated from Fuah and Kafraya. The UN was to oversee the ceasefire, and facilitate the transfer of the fighters and civilians. Most significantly the agreement prohibited shelling or aerial bombing on the rebel held towns of Idlib City, Binnish, Taftanaz

31. uk.reuters.com/article/2015/08/11/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ceasefire-idUKKCN0Q2AZ20150811
32. qunfuz.com/2015/08/30/the-dissolution-of-past-and-present/
33. syrianobserver.com/EN/Commentary/29693/Opinion_Is_Zabadani_Land_Swap_Prelude_Partitioning_Syria
34. theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/26/syrian-rebels-and-assad-regime-agree-ceasefire
35. eaworldview.com/2015/09/syria-developing-major-ceasefire-agreement-between-rebels-and-regime/
and Maarat Misriin in Idlib province. As well, helicopters were not permitted to fly there, or drop supplies of ammunition to regime forces.

This offer was accepted by Jaysh Al-Fatah and the Zabadani rebels. While it was widely criticised by opposition activists, it was seen by many as a necessary concession to stop the daily bombardment of rebel towns in Idlib, save the remaining rebel fighters in Zabadani and provide some respite to the civilians in surrounding towns.

The ceasefire was quickly violated by the regime shelling Taftanaz, both sides claimed to want to hold to it. It has now been superseded by the Russian intervention, which has struck towns across Idlib province. Following the bombings, the UN has suspended its humanitarian work in Syria, meaning only a few wounded fighters managed to be transferred out, and no civilians.

The events surrounding the siege of Zabadani provide an insight into the regime’s overall strategy, and also its weaknesses. The fact the rebels were able to wring what in effect was a No Fly Zone out of the regime’s backers is a testament to their strength, and the regime’s desperation to avoid a serious rout of its forces which would damage morale and deprive it of much needed manpower. It shows the regime will negotiate, but only when it is in a position of weakness. Does the strength of the rebels, and weakness of the regime make a negotiated end to the conflict possible?

A Negotiated Solution?

Many commentators, including those on the anti-war left, are arguing for a negotiated solution to the conflict arranged between all the intervening powers, as a way to de-escalate the conflict in response to Russian intervention. Talked about as an alternative to further war or Western intervention, this ignores the

36. syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29859/No_Truce_With_Iran_Media_Activists_Reject_Zabadani_Ceasefire
37. en.eldorar.com/node/164
38. reuters.com/article/2015/10/02/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSKCN0RW1TM20151002
Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up?

fact that this has been the main demand of the US\textsuperscript{40} and EU\textsuperscript{41} states from the beginning of the uprising, for a political transition where Assad and his inner circle step down.\textsuperscript{42}

The opposition and Rebel factions are in favour of a political transition, with the condition that Assad and his inner circle must go and play no part in the transition process. All major rebel groups and civil society revolutionary organisations reached agreement on the Five Principles of the Syrian Revolution\textsuperscript{43} in mid September, laying out the necessary conditions for a political transition. This desire for a political transition was reiterated by the opposition and most major rebel groups in a joint statement condemning the Russian intervention, and outlining their framework for a negotiated political transition.\textsuperscript{44}

It has been the Assad regime which has categorically refused these repeated offers of a political transition. Britain’s last offer of a six month transition period\textsuperscript{45} whereby Assad could remain in place temporarily and oversee the transition, was rejected within 48 hours by the regime.\textsuperscript{46} For those advocating a negotiated solution, they have to acknowledge and account for the regime’s past treachery regarding truces, amnesties and ceasefires, and its persistent rejection of all attempts to negotiate an end to the conflict. Just a few examples demonstrate the impossibility of negotiating with the regime from a position of weakness.

In May 2012, while the UN was overseeing the final ceasefire to prevent civil war, pro-Assad sectarian shabeeha

\textsuperscript{40} aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising##RefHeading_Toc329938367
\textsuperscript{41} aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising##RefHeading_Toc329938373
\textsuperscript{42} reuters.com/article/2013/02/27/us-syria-crisis-kerry-idUSBRE91Q0MP20130227
\textsuperscript{44} uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/09/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-hammond-idUKKCN0R91SF20150909
\textsuperscript{46} theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/syria-rejects-british-proposal-for-assad-to-lead-transitional-government
Syria

massacred 108 civilians, mostly women and children in Houla, Homs.\footnote{sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/En_Alhoula.pdf}

In August 2013, while the UN inspectors arrived in Damascus to investigate allegations of chemical weapons use, Syrian troops fired sarin gas shells at opposition strongholds across the Damascus farmland known as al Ghouta, suffocating hundreds of civilians to death.

In February 2014, while the UN supervised a convoy to evacuate rebels’ families from central Homs, pro-regime extremists opened fire on the convoy. Many evacuees were unaccounted for, reportedly detained in contravention of the ceasefire agreement.\footnote{independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-fears-grow-for-dozens-of-men-missing-after-homs-evacuation-9124520.html}

In September 2015, the truce of mutual evacuations in Zabadani and Fuah was reached, reportedly also with the UN as a mediator. Within 48 hours of the truce, not only did the regime massacre children at an amusement park in Homs City\footnote{twitter.com/Jabhat_Al_Izz/status/647920371446992896} and bombard civilians in the town of Saraqeb, Idlib, but the regime also bombarded the town of Taftanaz which is covered by the truce with Fuah, killing among many others the media activist Abbada Ghazal.

The regime has shown itself time and again to be incapable of reform, and simply uses the channels of diplomacy as a weapon to buy time,\footnote{articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/19/world/la-fg-syria-truce-20140119} disorganise and divide the opposition, allowing it to consolidate its position and counter-attack. Assad is happy to play a waiting game,\footnote{thenational.ae/opinion/assad-is-more-than-happy-to-play-a-waiting-game} while the opposition backers try and push rebels factions into negotiations whose terms they will never agree with.

Now with the Russian bombing, Assad has toughened his stance,\footnote{eaworldview.com/2015/10/syria-feature-assad-talks-tough-after-russian-intervention-no-reforms-no-negotiations/} saying on Iranian television: “The only option for us now is to destroy terrorism, because implementing any solution or any political
Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up?

Ideas that might be agreed on will need a state of stability. Otherwise it has no value. Consequently, destroying terrorism is the foundation of any action in Syria. Political ideas can be implemented later.” This is a clear statement that the regime will not accept any political solution until it has crushed the rebels, meaning a ‘political solution’ imposed by itself over the bodies of hundreds of thousands of dead Syrians. This is an admission that in reality, the regime sees only a military solution: the complete crushing of the uprising. This is the future Syrians have before them. This is also clear to the rebels. A FSA commander in Hama commented that Russia’s intervention “is intended to exterminate the Free Syrian Army—no, the Syrian people”. This can be seen from the targeting of mainly Free Syrian Army units instead of ISIS, and its attacks on civilian infrastructure in the liberated areas; hospitals, bakeries, civilian councils and the Civil Defence rescue organisation.

The Russian intervention cannot hope to reconquer territory; neither Assad nor his backers have the manpower for that. What they can do is halt the rebel advance around Idlib, Lattakia and Hama, and clear the rebel enclaves from central Syria to better allow the formation of a rump state. The Jaysh Al-Fatah coalition is within striking distance of Hama, and if it broke through to the rebels in North Homs, would encircle the city on three sides. Hama is famously anti-Assad, having some of the largest anti-Assad rallies before the revolution militarised. Liberating the city would be a major victory for the rebels, and would scupper plans for partitioning the country. This possibility is what terrifies the regime and its backers, and why they are launching an assault on Homs countryside and threatening to exterminate all who remain there.

54. alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/10/5/a-call-to-arms-from-syrias-rebels
55. syriadirect.org/news/latakia-hospital-evacuates-following-airstrikes-on-two-nearby-hospitals/
56. twitter.com/syriacivildef/status/649258147899703299
57. thenational.ae/opinion/comment/putin-cant-save-assad-its-far-too-late-for-that
58.youtu.be/JHu_cO4m2Yc
59. syriadirect.org/news/homs-teacher-those-who-don%E2%80%99t-die-in-air-raids-will-die-when-the-regime-invades/
In the meantime the airstrikes are radicalising the opposition, and driving more rebels towards hardline Islamic groups, and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra. Mohannad al-Qasem, a resident of Rastan in Homs, told Syria Direct: “The entire international community has let us down… This is what I want to understand: Do they want us to become terrorists, to become IS fighters?!”

Whatever the impact of the Russian airstrikes on the opposition, it should be clear that anti-war activists globally need to oppose Putin’s intervention in Syria. It cannot realistically save Assad, and will only prolong the agony of Syrians who have struggled and suffered immensely to secure their freedom these past five years. Organising aid collections for opposition areas and those languishing in refugee camps, mobilising support for the Syrian revolutionaries still struggling and organising on the ground, and demonstrating opposition to any imperialist support for Assad are key activities for anti-imperialists and solidarity activists.

Pressure must be applied to our own governments not to deal with Assad, and to stop any attempts to force Syrians to accept Assad’s participation in a political transition. When the global imperialist consensus is that Assad must be part of the solution, this is paramount. Only the swift departure of the Assad clan and the core functionaries of the regime can bring the war to an end, and allow a political solution which preserves a united Syria, fulfils the basic principles of the revolution and can attempt to salvage a democratic civil state from the wreckage of the civil war. The alternative is for the armed struggle to continue until the regime is deposed, but that could cost hundreds of thousands more lives, and give more time for ISIS to sink its roots in the ruins left by the Assad regime and Russian intervention in Syria.

The revolution must win, one way or another, because the alternative is unthinkable. If the regime backed by Russian imperialism somehow manages to crush the rebel enclaves, establish a sectarian rump state and instigate partition, we will see violence and destruction on an even worse scale. The UN is already predicting a million more people displaced in Syria by the end of

60. uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/29/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-britain-idUKKCN0RT22920150929
Can the Revolution in Syria Survive an Imperial Carve Up?

A triumphant regime will slaughter thousands, and expel millions more to secure its rule. The current Palestinisation of the Syrian people could become a permanent reality, as millions of Syrians would be excluded indefinitely from this nightmare country divided between the tyrannical rulers of Assad and ISIS.

For these reasons, whatever happens, the rebels will keep fighting. Spokesperson for Ahrar Al-Sham, Ahmad Qura Ali commented: “The regime continuing and Assad staying is a failure... It also demonstrates disrespect towards the sacrifices of the Syrian people and, even more importantly, irreverence towards the will of the Syrian people”. An activist in Aleppo, Mamoun Abu Omar said: “Those who have suffered hundreds of thousands of deaths and so much destruction cannot take a step back. Whoever achieves only half a revolution is digging his own grave”.

61. theglobeandmail.com/news/world/syrian-war-seen-displacing-a-million-more-this-year-un-official/article26345782/
62. internationaleonline.org/opinions/25_forty_four_months_and_forty_four_years_4_palestinization_of_syrians_and_the_present_world_condition
Michael Karadjis: The Class Against Class Basis of the Syrian Uprising

Introduction to Eyal Zisser. Originally published at mkaradjis.wordpress.com

Countless articles have described the social background to the Syrian revolution, and a good bibliography would be a useful tool to be put together at some stage. Below is a fairly straightforward one, but the fundamental facts are well-known. The early Ba’ath Party governments of the 1960s built a base among the peasantry via land reforms and rural subsidy programs, and many Ba’ath political and military leaders had their origins in rural areas, eclipsing the traditional urban-based bourgeoisie. At that stage the main Muslim Brotherhood opposition tended to represent the opposition of the Sunni urban bourgeoisie. However, as a new capitalist class consolidated itself through the state apparatus—the typical process of Nasserite/Ba’athist/Kemalist development—the rural dwellers again got left behind.

But it was not until this new elite, under Bashar Assad after 2000, launched neoliberal ‘reforms’ that the new divide widened into an abyss. These reforms transformed the countryside, leaving it prey to a new class of big capitalist landowners, connected to the regime, driving large numbers of peasants into landlessness, while the abolition of subsidies and freeing of prices and similar measures further hammered the peasantry and the urban poor, who formed great new shanty-suburban rings around Damascus and Aleppo, first and generations from the impoverished countryside and still with family and other links to rural Syria.
While as elsewhere in the Arab Spring, the first sparks of revolt in early 2011 occurred in urban areas, in Syria these tended to be the smaller towns and cities located in impoverished regional areas, large rural towns essentially, from Daraa in the south to Idlib in the north; the movement in Damascus and Aleppo at this early stage did not look as magnificent as in Cairo and Tunis. From these rural towns the revolt spread like wildfire to the now vigorously anti-Ba’ath countryside. Eventually, the revolution did come to the two big cities by mid-2012, but the divide between regime-control and opposition-control in both cities is virtually a lesson in sociology: the suburbs dominated by the urban poor are controlled by the revolution, the more established middle and upper class suburbs are under the regime. Indeed, as virtually all analyses tell you, innocently enough, one of the sections of the population that has remained tied to the regime, apart from much of the Alawite and Christian minority population, is the Sunni ‘business classes’ in Damascus and Aleppo. Unlike in Egypt, Tunisia, and in its different way, Libya, the Syrian capitalist class, a creature of the Ba’ath, has remained tied solidly to the regime (indeed, this has to be understood as part of imperialism’s problem all along—where is the section of the ruling class to replace a discredited Assad with?). Of course it is not only the capitalist class—much of the secular, comfortable, established Sunni and Christian middle classes in these two cities remain tied to regime, if often grudgingly, due to the clear political limitations of much of the opposition leadership: a movement based among the overwhelmingly Sunni peasantry and urban poor, which has taken up arms, and which is overall more traditional and religious in outlook than the older established elites, may indeed look frightening to many. Of course, this ‘religiosity’ is also what many in the Western left are obsessed with, often in a way indistinguishable from the Islamophobic right; yet while there clearly are seriously reactionary jihadist formations in Syria, overall, the moderate Islamist rebel groups (or indeed even the adoption of religious names by some secular FSA brigades), simply reflect the greater religiosity of the urban and rural poor, ie, those sectors left out of the bourgeois ‘secular’ Ba’ath project, especially after 2000.

Thus, a revolution that for many is nothing but a ‘sectarian’ clash is in reality the sharpest class against class clash in the Arab Spring, thus its extraordinary tenacity and ferocity; its sectarian
element is, at base, an overlay of this. That doesn’t mean it hasn’t
gone further than this, and cannot go even further and simply
become a sectarian war (I maintain this is manifestly not the case
yet); but even if that did happen it wouldn’t cancel out the social
origins of this phenomenon.

Interestingly, the Syrian revolution can be seen as the mirror
image, in class/sectarian terms, of the Bahrain uprising, while
understanding obviously how different the two societies are:
there the state is controlled completely by the Sunni minority,
which rules over a vast Shiite majority, the urban and rural
poor, whose uprising was partially led by Shia clerics and was
overwhelmingly more religious in outlook than the regime and
the established classes which stood behind it; the regime and its
Saudi and Gulf backers were able to slander the uprising as an
Iranian fifth column. Whereas in Syria, the state in dominated
by a political and military elite from the Alawite minority (even
if it rules for a mixed Alawite-Sunni capitalist class), which rules
over a vast Sunni majority or rural and urban poor, whose revolt
is slandered by the regime as a Saudi/Gulf fifth column. But
enough from me...
The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 surprised many people. Until that time, it seemed that the 40-year reign of the Assad dynasty, at first under its founder, Hafiz, and then under his son and heir, Bashar, had succeeded in turning Syria into a strong and stable state with governmental institutions, military, and security forces. Even social and economic systems appeared quite sturdy and effective.

Yet a year and a half of bloody fighting between the regime and the rebels has undermined most of the achievements of the Assad dynasty and turned Syria into a failing state on the verge of disintegration. Most state institutions have ceased to function. The bonds that united the various religious and ethnic communities, tribes, and regions—that took many long years of hard work to forge—are rapidly unraveling. In addition, Syria has become a kind of punching bag with foreign actors, both regional and international, intervening freely in the country’s internal affairs.

How did the revolt spread so quickly to all parts of Syria, striking such deep roots among wide segments of the Syrian society? How has the Assad regime managed, for the time being and in contrast to other Arab regimes rocked by the recent upheavals, to survive the lethal challenges facing it? And how has it been able to maintain its cohesion and strength to the point where many observers do not preclude the possibility of its ultimate survival?
The Outbreak of the Syrian Revolution

The revolution in Syria, in contrast to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, was at its base a peasants’ revolt, a protest by the Sunni periphery against what was perceived as the Ba’ath regime turning its back on the country’s rural population. Only later did the rebellion take on additional dimensions with jihadists joining the struggle because of the regime’s ‘heretical’ Alawite nature and because of its alliance with Shiite Iran and Hezbollah. In the name of jihad, thousands of volunteers have streamed into Syria from all over the Arab and Muslim world though jihadist slogans probably did little to arouse Syrians to join the ranks of the revolution.

Revenge was another dimension that developed with time, stemming from the regime’s increasingly violent efforts to suppress the waves of protest. It is clear that the regime’s brutality served to expand the circle of participants in the revolution. Many who joined were motivated specifically by the desire to take revenge for the spilled blood of their family members and relatives or for the destruction of their home villages and towns by the regime’s forces.

Bombed-out buildings in Aleppo, October 3rd 2012, show the devastation perpetrated on civilians. The Assad regime’s brutal response to the revolt has only widened the circle of rebellion. Many who have joined the fighting are motivated by the desire to take revenge for the spilled blood of their relatives or the destruction of their homes and communities.

Paradoxically, in the past, the Sunni rural population had been one of the regime’s foremost mainstays. It was one of the main partners in Syria’s ruling coalition of minorities and the periphery, led by members of the Alawite community, who were in turn headed by the Assad dynasty. This coalition served as the basis for the Ba’ath revolution of March 1963, and later as the basis of support for the ‘Corrective Movement’ and for Hafiz al-Assad’s seizure of power in November 1970.

With the passage of time and especially from the beginning of the 2000s, it seemed as if the Syrian regime had ceased reflecting Syrian society. The regime even seemed to have turned its back on the rural areas and the periphery. Beginning in 2006, Syria experienced one of the worst droughts the state had ever known with the damage felt most intensely in the Jazira region of northeastern Syria and in the south, especially in the Hawran region and its central city of Dar’a.

These regions were also adversely affected by the government’s new economic policies, which aimed at changing the character of the Syrian economy from a socialist orientation into a ‘social market economy.’ The aim of these policies, led by Vice Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari, was to open Syria to the world economy, encourage foreign investment, and promote activity in the domestic private sector so as to ensure economic growth and enable the regime to cope with its domestic and economic challenges: rapid growth of the population, backward infrastructure and lack of advanced industry, over-reliance on agriculture, etc. The new policy was backed by Bashar al-Assad, who seemed to have underestimated the importance of the Ba’ath party’s socialist ideology as well as its institutions and networking, mainly in the periphery. One conclusion to be drawn from the negative reactions to this policy in the periphery was that while the Syrian regime did indeed manage to preserve its image of strength and solidity during the first decade of the 2000s, its support base was considerably narrowed. It lost the broad popular support that it had enjoyed among the Sunni population in the rural areas and the periphery after it turned its back on them.3

And so, from the time the revolution broke out in March 2011 in the city of Dar’a, the rebellion spread like wildfire to all the rural areas and the periphery, including the northern part of the state, the Jazira region, and later, the agricultural towns of Homs and Hama. The revolution reached the large cities, Damascus and Aleppo, only at a much later stage.

The Tlas Family and the Town of Rastan

An illustration of this turmoil can be found in the story of the Tlas family from the small town of Rastan. Headed by Mustafa Tlas, the family was one of the pillars of the Ba’ath regime, a living example of the close alliance between the regime and the Sunni periphery on the one hand, and between the Sunni and the Alawite officers led by the Assad dynasty on the other.

Rastan itself is the third largest town in the Homs district and numbers about 40,000 inhabitants according to a 2004 census. It is located on the main road between Aleppo and Damascus, on the segment between the towns of Homs and Hama, about 20 kilometers from Homs and 22 kilometers from Hama. Rastan’s residents earn their livings from agriculture and light industry, notably the rock quarries for which the town is known.

The town has two main clans, the Hamdan, the larger and stronger of the two, and the Firzat. The Tlas family belongs to the Hamdan clan. One of the family’s members, Abdel Qadr Tlas, served as the mukhtar (administrative head) of Rastan from the end of the Ottoman period into the French Mandate period. As a young man, Mustafa Tlas, Abdel Qadr’s son, became the ally and right hand man of Hafiz al-Assad. The two met at the Homs Military Academy, during the officers’ course in which they were enrolled after joining the Syrian army in November 1952. They were roommates during the course, and their paths never parted thereafter. They advanced in rank together and, in November 1970, seized power in Damascus with Hafiz leading and Mustafa helping him. At that time, Tlas was serving as commander in chief of the army and was quickly appointed minister of defense, a post he held until his retirement in 2004.

Tlas was in office during the brutal suppression of the Islamist revolt against the Ba’ath regime in 1976-82, which peaked with the massacre of the citizens of Hama in February 1982. His last task was, in essence, to help Assad’s son Bashar grow into his father’s big shoes.

Can Assads Syria Survive Revolution?

Tlas also established an economic empire. One of its showcases was a publishing house. He used this firm as a vehicle for publishing, in addition to works of other authors, his own ‘scholarly’ writings, memoirs, and even poetry. Tlas married Lamya Jabiri, a member of the Aleppine aristocracy, and the couple had four children: two daughters-Nahid, who married a Saudi businessman and moved with him to Paris, and Sarya-and two sons-Firas, who became a successful businessman in Damascus, and Manaf, who chose a military career. Manaf was known as a close friend of Bashar al-Assad and served as a brigade commander in the Republican Guard Division, an elite unit formed to protect the regime.6

Rastan and the Start of the Revolt

In addition to being home to the Tlas family, Rastan also serves as a faithful reflection of the Sunni periphery. It is not surprising that when the Syrian revolution broke out, the town became one of the revolt’s focal points. As early as the beginning of April 2011, the town square statue of Hafiz al-Assad was reportedly smashed to pieces as demonstrators shouted with joy.7 This was a symbolic act clearly expressing the town’s disengagement from the Ba’ath regime and from the Assad dynasty. However, Rastan is too strategically located to be given up. Since it is on a main road linking northern and southern Syria and close to the towns of Homs and Hama, it became a major scene of bloody battles between the regime’s army and the insurgents, in which scores of the town’s residents were killed.

The protest movement in Rastan did not bypass the Tlas family. The members of the family who were officers and soldiers, like many of their friends and colleagues, could not ignore the pressure of the unfolding events or the fate suffered by their relatives, neighbors, and home town.

The first Tlas family member to join the revolt was Abd al-Razzaq Tlas, who announced his desertion from the regular Syrian army as early as June 2011. He has subsequently served as commander of the Faruq battalion associated with the Free Syr-

ian Army, which operates in the region of Homs. As time passed, Abd al-Razzaq has become one of the closely watched symbols of the revolution. Thus, for example, innumerable interpretations were given to the fact that he has begun to grow a beard though this action did not necessarily stem from religious motives. His image was not damaged even after rumors were spread about his involvement in a sex scandal though he was apparently removed from his position as battalion commander.8 Additional members of the Tlas family followed him into the revolution until finally, in the summer of 2012, the reverberations reached the home of Mustafa Tlas. This was quite late in the game and only after it began to seem as if the days of the Assad regime were numbered.

During the first months of 2012, Mustafa Tlas, suffering from health problems, moved to Paris to be near his daughter Nihad. His son Firas soon followed and established contacts with opposition figures and began participating in resistance events abroad.9 At the beginning of July 2012, Manaf announced his defection from the ranks of the regime. In an interview with al-Arabiya news network, he explained, “I do not see myself as a senior figure in the ranks of the regime but rather as one of the sons of the Syrian Arab army who opposes barbarism and murder of innocents and the corrupt government… I hope for the establishment of a united Syria and for its rebuilding as a state that does not believe in or promote revenge, discrimination, or selfishness”.10 Immediately after Manaf’s defection, several opposition figures began to mention him as a possible leader of Syria after Bashar’s hoped-for fall. Other opposition figures, however, came out firmly against the idea.11

The steps taken by those members of the Tlas family serve as a graphic example of what was happening all over Syria during the past year and a half. They are good indicators of how people who had been strong supporters of the Assad regime turned their backs on it when they felt that it had betrayed them or no longer served their interests.

The Survival of the Regime

Every coin and almost every story has two sides, and so it is with the story of Syria. One side of the story has to do with the fact that the insurgents’ uprising spread quickly and struck deep roots. The other side of the story has to do with the regime and the undeniable fact that it has so far been able to survive. One explanation for this focuses on the built-in weaknesses of the opposition, which is a faithful reflection of the Syrian society: Both opposition and society suffer from divisions and fragmentation based upon ethnic, religious, regional, socioeconomic, and other differences. Another explanation focuses on the international community’s lack of will or ability to intervene in Syria. A third explanation highlights the sources of the regime’s strengths, calling attention to the fact that the regime survives, not only because of its opponents’ weaknesses, but also because of the reserves of power at its disposal.

One source of the regime’s strength lies in the support it receives from the members of the minority communities, who serve as its social bases. These include the Alawites (12 percent of the population), the Druze (5 percent), and most of the Christians (13 percent). The Kurds (10 percent), including those who live in the regions bordering Turkey and Iraq, have for the most part, not turned against the government either. Many Kurds have exploited the revolution to throw off government control and advance the cause of partial Kurdish independence. Nevertheless, the Syrian Kurds as a whole have refrained from joining the ranks of the opposition or coming out openly against the Assad regime.

Another source of regime strength lies in the fact that while turmoil has come to the suburbs and the slums of Aleppo and Damascus, the revolution has not ignited among urban Syrians, including the Sunni bourgeoisie of the big cities. Most big city residents have chosen to remain on the sidelines and not support the protests, fearing that this leap would result in political instability, as happened in Iraq or Lebanon, at immense costs.

Part of the reluctance stems from the economic benefits the urban bourgeoisie enjoy, especially during recent years thanks to the regime’s economic policies. Some have to do with the bourgeoisie’s age-old resentments, reservations, and aversion toward the periphery and the rural regions and their inhabitants. The numbers of urban dwellers are considerable. Some 55.7 percent of Syrians live in cities. Around eight million (out of the total population of 23 million) live in the country's three large cities: Aleppo (2.98 million), Damascus (2.52 million), and Homs (1.27 million). Most of the Christians live in these three cities.13

Since most opposition activists come from rural areas, most incursions into the big cities—including Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs—have been carried out by insurgents from nearby rural regions. They penetrate the big cities mostly through the slum neighborhoods and suburbs, which are often inhabited by recent migrants from the periphery and rural areas. These migrants generally maintain connections with relatives back home, and it is from there that the armed bands come. But because the bourgeoisie of Damascus and Aleppo have refrained from joining the insurgents,14 the Syrian opposition has been denied victory photos such as those from Cairo’s Tahrir Square, which made it clear that the die had been cast in Egypt and that the youth were on the revolution’s side. In Syria, for the time being, the youth in the big cities prefer to remain shut up in their homes.

Another source of the regime’s strength lies in the loyalty of its institutions, in particular, the army, the security apparatuses, the state bureaucracy, and the Ba‘ath party apparatuses. Indeed, in many cases, using the party’s networks, the regime was able to recruit and mobilise local families in various areas, including Sunni neighborhoods, which have become local militias fighting for the regime. These include members of the Sunni community in particular with the emphasis on the Sunni periphery.

**Loyalists in Rastan**

Returning to Rastan, it is clearly not a big city but of the rebel

---

Can Assads Syria Survive Revolution?

Can Assads Syria Survive Revolution? But it is also undisputable that many of its residents remain loyal to the regime. In the Tlas family, some have joined the ranks of the rebels, but others maintain neutrality, and still others continue to work for the government. Thus, Talal Tlas serves as Syria's deputy minister of defense and Ahmad Tlas serves as the commander of the First Corps, the most important military unit in southern Syria. And the various branches of the Tlas family continue to live together in Rastan; battles in the town take place between rebels and army forces that come from outside in order to attack.

Beside these two senior Tlas members, there are others still serving loyally as army officers, perhaps because they consider this to be in their best personal interest and a good way to advance their careers. Their position is quite different from that of the younger officers, like Abd al-Razzaq Tlas, who has his whole future before him. Joining the ranks of the revolution promises him a brilliant future should it succeed. In any case, as a young officer, he did not have nearly as many vested interests to leave behind and potentially lose. The situation of the senior and middle level officers is much different. They could lose everything, all their achievements, their ranks, pensions, possibilities for further advancement, and other benefits and privileges. Joining the revolution means sacrifice for a vague future full of unknowns. The revolutionary future holds out the promise of great rewards for the youth, but not necessarily for the symbols of the old regime.

It is clear that as long as the members of the Tlas family and people like them give the regime their support, it will be able to survive. Only about 10 percent of the army's manpower has defected. The other 90 percent, both soldiers and officers, the great majority of whom come from the Sunni periphery, continues to stand united around the regime, giving it the breathing space it so desperately needs.

Conclusions

The story of the Tlas family and their town, Rastan, attests to the complexity of the Syrian picture. The regime is losing blood

daily; little by little support for it diminishes. Since the eruption of the revolution, the trend has clearly been in one direction only. Nevertheless, the regime retains reserves of support that enable it to survive. A dramatic shift in the situation, such as Bashar’s assassination or an unexpected intervention by the international community, could give the insurgents the push they need and bring about a major change in the course of the conflict. But the example of the Tlas family and Rastan suggests that the struggle for Syria will still take a long time to unfold.
The Assassin
Michael Tencer and Andy Wilson (eds)
ISBN: 978-0-9926509-2-6
Published: Dec 2014, 518pp


Priorlectics: Also within are the complete pamphlets: Ian Land, The SWP vs Lenin • Ben Watson, Music, Violence, Truth • and an extract from Andy Wilson’s, Faust: Stretch Out Time.

AMM Journal: There are also 100s of pages of scores, photographs, poems, paintings and images, essays, comics, reviews, notices and manifestos from the AMM, its friends and supporters. Featured articles include essays on Comic Book Marxism • Jeff Keen Flix • Critique of the Situationist Dialectic • Wilhelm Reich and Class Consciousness • The State of Scripts • Cartoon Trumpets and Horseshit • The 60s Counterculture, and the Culture of the Left, and more.

Contributors: Jules Alford • Ana-Maria Avram • Derek Bailey • Dave Black • Sean Bonney • Sharon Borthwick • Sky Budgen • Dunya Bueler • Marie-Angelique Bueler • Stuart Calton • Eugene Chadbourne • Louise Challice • Ray Challinor • Sophie Clare • Ged Colgan • Eleanor Crook • Rob Dellar • THF Drenching • Iancu Dumitrescu • Evil Dick • Simon H. Fell • Keith Fisher • Chris
Psycho Politics: Laing, Foucault, Goffman, Szasz and the Future of Mass Psychiatry
Peter Sedgwick
ISBN: 978-0-9926509-5-7
Published: Oct 2015, 348pp

A classic in the field of mental health, one of the few credible critiques of the anti-psychiatry movement which retains its significance today, Psycho Politics includes scholarly appraisals of the ideas of Goffman, Laing, Szasz and Foucault and proposals for a politics of mental health which neither separates mind and body, nor abdicates responsibility for the alleviation of suffering. Sedgwick argues that mental health movements have overemphasised individual civil liberty at the expense of developing collective responsibility for mental health care. This book has wide ranging implications for political activism, social movements and the future of mental health care. This edition has a new foreword by Helen Spandler, Rob Dellar and Alastair Kemp placing Sedgwick’s work in context today, and includes for the first time the text of Sedgwick’s 1983 address to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, ‘The Fate of Psychiatry in the New Populism’.
Robert Dellar’s reminiscences impart a strange, unwholesome joy, like smoking a cig dipped in popper juice. The only response to the atrocious farce of modern life has to be this savage laughter.

Out to Lunch

In this incendiary slice of under-the-radar British social history we meet everyone from Ronnie Corbett to a Broadmoor inmate whose index offence was the subject of a D-Notice. Robert Dellar’s anti-authoritarian and take-no-prisoners spirit of mischief makes it possible for readers of every persuasion to find something to offend their sensibilities.

Simon Morris (Ceramic Hobs)

Yealm: A Sorterbiography

Sheila Lahr

Yealm is a memoir set in the first half of the twentieth century. It deals with the migration of Jews from the East, Anarchist circles, imprisonment, London bohemia, schooling, war, evacuation, the world of work and all the intricacies of everyday life that bolster and ruin us. Through all this course the destructive energies of world events. We observe the ways in which people are flung around by forces that are greater than themselves. Yealm is both intimate and grand-scale. All the contradictions that texture lives, personal and political, are assembled here, like the bundle of straw that lends the title, in order to make sense of the nonsense of official history.
Derelicts: Thought Worms From the Wreckage
Esther Leslie
Published: Mar 2014, 254pp

Philosophy and art with the imagination to actually change the world: this is the unfinished dream of history and the heart of the revolutionary modernism of the early 20th century, which globalised war and exploitation managed indefinitely to defer. Esther Leslie reopens the cold case on filmmakers, artists, thinkers and other animals, exiled or otherwise Disneyfied, and finds still-warm fertile ground for a wild future as yet unfulfilled. From ideal homes with traces erased to utopian rivers drawn back to their source, the alienated subject of history discerns its rightful place in the present tense, with no room for buts or half-measures. The derelicts of history find new life beyond commodified thought: would that the same could be said for all their readers.

Michael Tencer

Azmud
Ken Fox
ISBN: 978-0-9568176-4-8
Published: Mar 2013, 270pp

Drifting in and out of sense as in an interrupted dream, Azmud is a novel contribution to literary art as political allegory. In each of its five sections—‘expired generations’—it attempts to retell the tale of the human psyche, the damage it has undergone under capitalism, in the form of a wandering work tribe searching for value in the spectacular flow of mass communication, on behalf of various severe ‘generals’ who demand a quota of abstract accumulation. But each of Azmud’s industrial adventures in turn become allegories for the act of the text’s own creation. But what happens in Azmud? Under orders, a human herd wanders thru the dense miasma of mass communication, hunting for precious ox-ore to stash in their air-ark or fuel their ancient steam engine. A vagrant crew invades the broken dreams of a drowsy industrial tycoon, stealing baskets full of his precious sleep. A homeless hoard combs thru post-industrial litter, searching for burnable rubble. A fake engineer captures a team of lost work-horses and four mammoth protozoans to help boost the energy yield of his toxic currents. A cargo ship collects a crew of stranded industrial outcasts with their precious ark full of ore and its tyrannical captain subjects them to relentless injections and many unwanted adventures.

Association of Musical Marxists
More Years for the Locust
Jim Higgins
ISBN: 978-0-9568176-3-1
Published: Jun 2012, 330pp

There is a human scale to the story so often missing in the more staid accounts of the left and its history which often create an artificial barrier between readers and the activists being written about, who were after all, people much like them. This dimension of the book which, to put it bluntly, makes it such a good laugh, also provides a great store of what Aristotle would have called practical wisdom. The laughter and the nous are here very closely related and impossible to summarise, they must be read...

The trouble with Higgins is ultimately our own trouble. The reward for recognising this is to be able to rehabilitate and nourish a part of ourselves. The IS tradition is broader than the latest line or missive from the latest CC. This may seem a problem to some but it ought to be seen as a great resource. Revolutionaries too have traditions. Perhaps we are now in a position to learn from Higgins even if we were sadly a bit too stupid to do so before.

John Game

Cosmic Orgasm: The Music of Iancu Dumitrescu
Andy Wilson (ed)
Published: May 2013, 406pp

As a creator of radical music that breaks convention, riding on the edge of the classical avant garde onto realms more closely associated with the likes of Nurse With Wound or The Hafler Trio, Iancu Dumitrescu has the talent to lure you in, mystify and startle with unnerving ferocity.

Alan Freeman

Of all living composers, Dumitrescu is the one who has most exploded sound. Dumitrescu’s work is a negation, from the depths, of everything in contemporary music symptomatic of distraction, of banalisation, and of a radical loss of purpose. His music is not a new convolution in the knot of modern music, but an unravelling of the curse.

Tim Hodgkinson
Blake in Cambridge
Ben Watson
ISBN: 978-0-9568176-8-6
Published: Apr 2012, 168pp

Blake in Cambridge was written after reading William Blake's visionary epic Milton during extended bouts of childcare in Coram's Fields in the summer of 2010. Blake in Cambridge is the Marxist critique of Eng. Lit. Christopher Caudwell was meant to write, but screwed up due to a CPGB sociology which denies literature the chance to answer back. In Marx's polemic, the jokes of Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote became weapons in class struggle. This, argues Watson, is how Blake can and should be used.

The Struggle for Hearts and Minds: Essays on the Second World War
Ray Challinor
ISBN: 978-0-9568176-1-7
Published: Sep 2011, 128pp

This book of essays is a shocking read, but the shocks arrive from the history itself, not sensationalist writing. We've been told that the Second World War was a war against evil waged by the goodhearted and true. The spectre of Hitler and Nazism is invoked every time NATO bombs are aimed at a defenceless country.

In his scathing account of ruling-class fears, plans and allegiances, Ray Challinor shows how much their every move was governed by competition and self-interest—and anxieties about popular reaction. His evidence shatters the comforting national myth which has been spun around the cataclysm—and shows that people, working-class people, do not like killing each other, they had to be cajoled and manipulated into doing so.

Unkant

Read Ray Challinor's, The Struggle for Hearts and Minds, to learn the truth, not just about the Second World War, but of the eternal truth about war: They were bombing Iraqi villages in 1923.

Sharon Borthwick, Unkant
It is impossible to fully grasp Rimbaud’s work, and especially Une Saison en Enfer, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Marx’s Capital. And this is why no English speaking poet has ever understood Rimbaud. Poetry is stupid, but then again, stupidity is not the absence of intellectual ability but rather the scar of its mutilation.

Rimbaud hammered out his poetic programme in 1871, just as the Paris Commune was being blown off the map. He wanted to be there. It’s all he talked about. The “systematic derangement of the senses” is the social senses, ok, and the “I” becomes an “other” as in the transformation of the individual into the collective when it all kicks off. It’s only in the English speaking world you have to point simple shit like that out. But then again, these poems have nothing to do with Rimbaud. If you think they’re translations you’re an idiot. In the enemy language it is necessary to lie.

With its meticulous attention to detailed sources, its comprehensive scope and its exacting research, this book doesn’t just address the neglect of this important and interesting episode in Labour movement history, but more importantly it also challenges us to think again about the revolutionary potential of the British Labour movement.

John McDonnell MP, Foreword
Starting with the commodity form (rather than the ‘spirit’ lauded by everyone from Classic FM retards to NME journalists), Adorno outlined a revolutionary musicology, a passageway between subjective feeling and objective conditions. In Adorno for Revolutionaries, Ben Watson argues that this is what everyone’s been looking for since the PCF blackened the name of Marxism by wrecking the hopes of May ’68. Batting aside postmodern prattlers and candyass pundits alike, this collection detonates the explosive core of Adorno’s thought. Those ‘socialists’ who are frightened of their feelings can go stew in their imaginary bookshop. For us, great music is a necessity. To talk about it is to criticise everything that exists.

Association of Musical Marxists

For those who have the ears to hear I strongly recommend Adorno For Revolutionaries as a substantial and very readable effort.

David Black, Hobgoblin