

Hands off Syria!

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The media's attempt to whip up public outrage over the Houla massacre, combined with the coordinated expulsion of Syrian diplomats by the major powers, are acts of brazen cynicism. Their aim is to legitimise the ongoing campaign of destabilisation by the Obama administration and its European and Middle-Eastern allies that is directly responsible for Houla and every other outrage perpetrated in Syria since the conflict began in 2011.

In the midst of such naked propaganda, workers and young people must above all maintain steadfast opposition to all calls for Western military intervention against Syria.

There is still no reliable account of what took place in Houla that would allow anyone to dismiss out of hand the Assad regime's insistence that it played no part in the massacre and that it was the work of provocateurs. All witnesses so far are from the Sunni community and will have been vetted by the opposition leadership. Everything from casualty figures to the identity of victims—who are always portrayed as civilians rather than insurgents—is routinely exaggerated and misrepresented, as admitted by the United Nations' own observers.

However, even if the account advanced by the opposition is wholly true—that most lives were lost due to sectarian murders committed by pro-regime Alawite militias after initial shelling by the armed forces of opposition bases—Houla is only one terrible example of the innumerable atrocities taking place in Syria.

The exclusive focus on Houla divorces it from the daily acts of sectarian violence perpetrated by both sides, including kidnappings, torture, murders and car bombings in Damascus and elsewhere by al-Qaeda elements within the opposition that have claimed dozens of lives—55 in a single incident in Damascus on May 10 and over 40 in December last year.

Thousands have died on both sides and many more

have been maimed or driven from their homes. Whatever crocodile tears are shed in the White House, Downing Street and the *Élysée* Palace, this is exactly what the Western powers counted on when they took the decision to fund and arm the Sunni insurgency last year.

The imperialist powers are past masters in manipulating religious, ethnic and tribal divisions in order to pursue a policy of divide and rule. In response to the fall of trusted client regimes in Tunisia and Egypt as a result of mass popular protest, they were determined to shape any subsequent political shifts in the strategically vital areas of North Africa and the Middle East. Where opposition threatened Western allies—in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia—it would be opposed outright or channelled behind Sunni-based movements like the Muslim Brotherhood that could then be cultivated as a new regional power base in alliance with the Gulf regimes and Turkey. Alternatively, Sunni insurgents could be pitched against those regimes considered either unreliable, like Muammar Gaddafi's in Libya, or too close to Iran, like Assad's Syria.

Iran has always been the ultimate target of the machinations against Syria, along with the more general geo-strategic aim of curtailing the influence of Russia and China.

Talk of Syria's "descent" into civil war and the statement by United Nations-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan that a "tipping point" has been reached are an insult to the collective intelligence of the world's people. The major powers have been pushing for such an outcome since day one.

Syria's insurgents were armed at the behest of Washington via its allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and organized around a base provided by Turkey. They were pitched against the Syrian Army in areas surrounding Deraa and Homs.

The plan was that Syria would be destabilized politically and, thanks to sanctions, ruined economically to the point where Assad would be forced to step down. Or, given the lack of popular support for a sectarian insurgency in Syria's multi-faith urban areas such as Damascus and Aleppo, a proxy war might be mounted using the Arab League and Turkey as a possible front. Arguments continue within ruling circles over whether this course of action should now be taken using the pretext of Houla.

France's newly elected Socialist Party President Francois Hollande, stepping into the shoes recently vacated by Nicholas Sarkozy, insists most strenuously that "Military intervention is not excluded provided it is carried out with respect to international law, meaning after deliberation by the United Nations Security Council."

A politically despicable role is played on behalf of the imperialists by ex-left outfits such as Britain's Socialist Workers Party, who reprise their role in Libya by portraying a Western-sponsored sectarian insurgency as a "revolution" carried out by the masses. As with Libya, they caution against Western military intervention (as if this is not already taking place), while supporting bourgeois movements—the Syrian National Council, the Local Coordinating Committees and the Free Syrian Army—whose express aim is to provoke such an intervention.

In Syria, as elsewhere throughout the Middle East, everything depends upon overcoming the political domination of the masses by bourgeois forces, whether Islamist, nominally liberal or pseudo-left, which have allowed events to be dictated by the imperialists. This has already led to the election of an Islamist regime funded by Qatar in Tunisia, elections in Egypt that are also dominated by Islamists with the military still firmly in charge, and a bloody war in Libya that installed a pro-Western client regime.

The stakes are high. Syria's escalating civil war and the growing threat of Western intervention raises the danger of a regional war, involving Iran on one side and Turkey and the Gulf monarchies on the other, which would tear the Middle East apart. It is up to the working class to do all in its power to prevent such an outcome.

The reactionary regimes in Riyadh, Doha, Cairo and Tunis are no less deserving than Syria's Baathists of

meeting their end. They must all be overthrown and replaced by socialist, anti-imperialist and genuinely democratic governments, uniting the working class and the rural masses irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliations.

In the West a new anti-war movement is required that is likewise liberated from the stranglehold of the pseudo-lefts and liberals who are now, for the most part, transformed into open advocates of "humanitarian war". The responsibility of workers and young people in America and Europe is to repudiate the cynical moral posturing of their own governments and to demand an end to their predatory designs on Syria and the rest of the Middle East.

Such a mass movement requires a new leadership that advances a strategy of world socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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