

Syria's "eerie parallel to Afghanistan" and the pro-imperialist pseudo-left

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Last week, the *Washington Post* published a commentary by columnist David Ignatius entitled "Syria's Eerie Parallel to 1980s Afghanistan." In the column, Ignatius, a well-informed bourgeois journalist with contacts in the upper echelons of the state, draws a revealing parallel between the CIA operation in Afghanistan in the 1980s to oust the pro-Soviet regime and current developments in Syria.

Ignatius openly discusses US imperialism's strategy to bring down the regime of Bashar al-Assad and install a pro-American government in Syria. He speaks from the class standpoint of the American bourgeoisie, seeking to offer advice to the Obama administration. He describes the US operation in Syria and addresses some of the problems the White House confronts in fashioning its imperialist policy.

Ignatius writes: "The United States and its allies are moving in Syria toward a program of covert support for the rebels that, for better or worse, looks very much like what America and its friends did in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

"The parallels are spooky. In Syria, as in Afghanistan, CIA officers are operating at the borders (in this case, mostly in Jordan and Turkey), helping Sunni insurgents improve their command and control and engaging in other activities. Weapons are coming from third parties (in Afghanistan, they came mostly from China and Egypt; in Syria, they're mainly bought on the black market). And finally, a major financier for both insurgencies has been Saudi Arabia.

"There's even a colorful figure who links the two campaigns: Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who as Saudi ambassador to Washington in the 1980s worked to finance and support the CIA in Afghanistan and who now, as chief of Saudi intelligence, is encouraging operations in Syria."

Ignatius' comment substantiates the *World Socialist Web Site's* analysis that Washington and its allies in the Gulf are arming and financing proxies inside Syria, including Al Qaeda, to fight the Assad regime as part of its strategy to subjugate the entire Middle East.

The "eerie parallel" between Syria and Afghanistan that Ignatius is identifying indicates the magnitude of the crime US imperialism is preparing in Syria. The three-decade-long

rape of Afghanistan by US imperialism ranks, together with the wars against Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, among the greatest crimes of the past century.

The parallels between Afghanistan and Syria are indeed staggering. In Afghanistan, US imperialism used terrorist forces and inflamed tribal and sectarian divisions first to destabilize and then to attack and occupy a country critical to the economic and strategic interests of US imperialism.

The destruction of Afghan society by US imperialism began in 1979, when the Carter administration launched a covert CIA operation to arm and finance Islamist mujahedeen to fight a Soviet-backed government that had come to power in 1978. The aim of the operation was to provoke a Soviet intervention and draw the USSR into a bloody quagmire in Afghanistan, while expanding US influence in the strategically vital and energy-rich region of Central Asia.

As in Syria today, the US and its allies armed and financed the most reactionary Islamist forces, including the network of Osama bin Laden, to destabilize Afghanistan. Then, as now, Washington promoted its terrorist proxies as "freedom fighters," even as they plunged Afghanistan into a terrible war that cost the lives of up to two million people and made millions more refugees.

After the Soviet Union withdrew its last forces from Afghanistan in 1989, the US stepped up its criminal campaign in the country. In the mid-1990s, the US and its Pakistani and Saudi allies backed an Islamist regime led by the Taliban. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, the US opted for a direct military intervention and occupation of Afghanistan to secure its interests in Central Asia.

The attack was fraudulently carried out under the banner of a "war on terror" against the same Islamist forces Washington had previously financed and armed, and upon which the US is once again relying in Syria.

Ignatius writes: "What's scary about Syria is that al-Qaeda is already fighting there, in the hundreds. Cells in Mosul and other parts of northern Iraq are sending fighters across the

Syria-Iraq border, with the jihadist pipeline now operating in reverse.”

As in Afghanistan, Washington regards the terrorist forces as tactical allies only as long as they serve its interests. Ignatius cynically writes, “The rebels fighting Assad deserve limited US support, just as the anti-Soviet mujahedeen did.” He then warns the Obama administration, “But be careful: This way lies chaos and extremism that can take a generation to undo if the United States and its allies aren’t prudent.”

Reflecting the depths of the criminality of US policy, Ignatius suggests that the US repeat in Syria the strategy it pursued in occupied Iraq, containing Islamist terrorist forces by inflaming tribal tensions.

He writes that the “United States should subtly play the tribal card, which may be as crucial in Syria as it was in Iraq.” He continues: “The leaders of many Syrian tribes have sworn a blood oath of vengeance against Assad, and their power is one reason the engine of this insurgency is rural, conservative and Sunni. But Iraq showed that the tribal leaders can be the best bulwark against the growth of al-Qaeda and other extremists.”

Ignatius’ comment tears to pieces the claims advanced by the various pseudo-left tendencies—such as the American International Socialist Organization (ISO), the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the French New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the Australian Socialist Alternative, the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists and the Syrian Revolutionary Left—that the events in Syria are a “popular” or “social revolution.”

In order to justify this claim, the pseudo-left groups have either to cover up the CIA operation taking place in Syria or openly embrace it.

There are those like Alex Callinicos, the leader of the SWP, and the ISO’s Richard Seymour who simply deny that imperialism plays any role in Syria. In a comment published July 28, Callinicos declares, “there is no evidence” that “Syria is being ‘recolonized’” and that it is a “Western priority to remove the Assad regime.”

In one of the ISO’s most recent articles on Syria, Richard Seymour writes (August 13) that “the main popular forces in the Syrian opposition are neither pawns nor proxies, nor are they under the domination of pawns and proxies. The armed contingent is too diverse, too localized and too disarticulated to be a proxy army, or simply a force of reaction as some claim.”

Others, like Corey Oakley of the Socialist Alternative, admit that an imperialist operation is taking place in Syria. In an article “The left, Imperialism and the Syrian Revolution,” first published on August 16 and subsequently translated into Arabic and published by the Syrian

Revolutionary Left on August 22, Oakley declares that “only a fool would deny that the imperialist powers are intervening in Syria, or that there are deeply reactionary elements present among the rebel forces.”

He then makes clear that he is nevertheless willing to support the operation. Oakley asks if it is “wrong for the Syrian revolutionaries to demand, and where possible accept, weapons from imperialists, the imperialists’ allies or anyone else?” He provides a definitive answer: “Of course not.”

Pham Binh, an activist of the Occupy Wall Street Class War Camp, is even more open in summing up the essentially pro-imperialist position advanced by all the pseudo-left groups. In an article “Libya and Syria: When Anti-Imperialism Goes Wrong” he attacks those who oppose imperialism as counterrevolutionary and defines US imperialism as a progressive force.

Binh writes that “the progressive instinct to oppose anything the US government does abroad became anything but progressive once the Arab Spring sprang up in Libya and Syria... The moment the Syrian and Libyan revolutions demanded imperialist airstrikes and arms to neutralize the military advantage enjoyed by governments over revolutionary peoples, anti-interventionism became counter-revolutionary because it meant *opposing aid to the revolution.*”

Binh’s statements are as cynical as they are false. The US war against Libya, as the CIA operation in Syria, aimed not to support the struggles of the Arab masses for democracy and social equality, but to further Washington’s counterrevolutionary offensive against the mass working-class struggles that ousted US-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt at the beginning of 2011.

In supporting and promoting US imperialism’s counterrevolutionary strategy of war and terror as “revolutionary,” the pseudo-left groups serve the same class interests as US imperialism’s cold-blooded advisors such as Ignatius, who describe Washington’s operations more forthrightly as a means for imposing imperialist domination over yet another former colonial country, and ultimately the entire Middle East.



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