

# A crass apology for imperialist intervention in Syria

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In the midst of a growing drumbeat for direct Western intervention in Syria, Gilbert Achcar, a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London and the chief Middle East analyst for the Pabloite United Secretariat, has dismissed questions about imperialist interests in the region as a “conspiracy theory.”

In an interview posted on the web site of the Pabloite publication *International Viewpoint*, Achcar is asked by the South African magazine *Amandla* for his response “to those who argue that the Syrian uprising may be an opening for imperialist interests in the region.”

Achcar replies that the question “hints at the kind of conspiracy theory among those that call themselves anti-imperialist and tend to see the hand of imperialism behind everything.”

Employing the “Arab Spring” narrative to obscure the real nature of the unfolding developments in the Middle East and North Africa, he equates the mass revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, which were dominated by an upsurge of the working class, with the subsequent developments in Libya and Syria, in which sectarianism, Islamist elements, and US-NATO intervention have played the decisive roles.

“[U]prisings overthrew faithful allies of Washington, including Egypt’s Mubarak, a key strategic partner in the region. To think Washington would have wished for this is ridiculous,” says Achcar.

No, what is ridiculous—and thoroughly dishonest—is the way Achcar conflates these developments so as to obscure the real sequence of events.

It is no doubt the case that in 2011, US imperialism and its allies proved incapable of rescuing their client regimes, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, though in the aftermath of the revolutionary upheavals in those countries they have relied on repression by the security forces and Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood leaderships, together with the political complicity of the pseudo-left parties, to suppress, divert and contain these movements.

Washington, London and Paris responded to these revolutionary events with their own pre-emptive campaigns for regime change, first in Libya and now in Syria, working through local proxy forces to prepare for direct military

intervention.

In Libya, the target was the country that lay between Egypt and Tunisia, where the US and its NATO allies sought to impose a more pliant regime and gain control over the country’s oil resources at the expense of their rivals, particularly China.

In Syria, the stakes are even higher. Similar strategic and profit interests are involved, both in terms of Syria’s own oil reserves and its pivotal position in relation to pipeline projects initiated by Iran, as well as Syria’s long-standing alliance with Russia, which Washington is determined to push out of the region.

More decisively, Syria has been targeted because of its alliance with Iran, which is regarded by US imperialism as its principal regional rival for hegemony over the vast energy reserves of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. The war in Syria is in large measure a preparation for an even more bloody and explosive intervention against Iran itself. It is noteworthy that the word “Iran” appears nowhere in Achcar’s interview.

It has been the special task of “left” political elements like Achcar to conceal these preparations behind uncritical support for the Western-backed oppositions, dismissal of imperialist intervention as “conspiracy theories,” and the blackguarding of those who oppose the US-led wars for regime-change as supporters first of Gaddafi and then of Assad.

Achcar insisted during the Libyan intervention that it was necessary to cast aside “anti-imperialist principles” on “humanitarian” grounds, i.e., that the imperialist powers were intervening to save the lives of civilians. He and other so-called lefts swallowed whole the propaganda campaign about an imminent massacre in Benghazi and then amplified it, insisting that there was no alternative to a US-NATO bombing campaign.

This was not a matter of political miscalculation or naiveté on the part of these pseudo-left forces, but rather a deliberate lining up with imperialism that was bound up with deep-seated hostility to the development of any genuine revolutionary movement of the working class in the region.

Now they are performing the same service in Syria. Washington, Achcar tells his interviewer, is in a “great quandary” about the Syrian events.

He continues: “As in Libya, it refuses to deliver weapons to the insurgency despite insistent requests... The truth is that the war has dragged on much longer than it might have had the insurgency received weapons. And the cost is terrible and tragic because of the loss of thousands and thousands of lives.”

Here once again we have the noxious combination of outright lies and “humanitarian” propaganda for imperialist intervention that is the hallmark of Achcar’s politics.

“Washington refuses to deliver weapons?” Whom does he think he is kidding? A recent article in the *New York Times* estimated—“conservatively”—that some 3,500 tons of arms have poured into the country. While formally the Obama administration has refrained from directly providing US weapons, Washington is most certainly organizing and directing the delivery of this flow of arms from its allies in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

The conception that lives could be saved if only the collection of Islamist militias that make up the so-called rebels received more and better weapons is absurd on its face. The demand that Washington directly arm these elements, which Achcar echoes, is designed first and foremost to prepare a direct US military intervention.

Asked whether there is a “class basis” to the civil war in Syria, Achcar replies that “It’s not a class uprising in the sense that it has any form of clear-cut class consciousness.” He suggests that it began with support in “poor rural towns” and that there is “no doubt that the uprising is a popular movement.”

In other words, this “uprising” is not a movement of the Syrian working class. In fact, it has been organized increasingly on sectarian lines, led by reactionary Islamist forces, including Al Qaeda, with the bulk of the Syrian population caught in the middle of a civil war fomented from the outside. While broad sections of the working class oppose the Assad regime, they are even more hostile to the Islamists. This, more than the amount and quality of arms, explains the failure of the “rebels” to dislodge the regime.

Achcar acknowledges the role of the Islamic fundamentalists, including Al Qaeda, declaring, “and yet you have people saying this is a US plot; this is ridiculous.”

It is not “ridiculous,” but rather undeniable that US imperialism has intervened in three countries in the region—Iraq, Libya and now Syria—to overthrow secular Arab regimes. In Iraq it unleashed sectarian religious forces and in both Libya and Syria it has backed Islamist militias as proxy armies in its wars for regime-change. In many ways, this strategy parallels that pursued by Washington in the 1980s in Afghanistan, where it presided over the birth of Al Qaeda and collaborated closely with Osama bin Laden.

Achcar argues that “Washington wants a deal with the regime that would preserve the state, because it is afraid of chaos, especially in such a strategic location.”

This is another gross and deliberate falsification. For over a

decade, Washington has targeted Syria, designated part of the Bush administration’s “Axis of Evil” in May 2002. The US has intervened directly to prevent any negotiated settlement with the Assad regime, recognizing the Muslim Brotherhood-led Syrian National Coalition as the “sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”

While admitting the predominant role played by the Islamists in the US-backed war and the reactionary character of their politics, Achcar affirms that this is the case throughout the region and really no great cause for concern. He argues that “very rapidly these forces are losing ground because the dynamics of the uprising, and the depth of the socio-economic problems, are such that the fundamentalists have no solutions and therefore their failure is inevitable.”

In other words, the predominant political tendency in the “Syrian revolution” is, in Achcar’s words, “a bourgeois reactionary force,” but its victory will only expose its own bankruptcy and lead, presumably, to a progressive outcome. On that basis one could have supported Hitler.

By all credible accounts, however, these forces are gaining, not losing, ground in Syria’s sectarian-based civil war. As the *New York Times* was compelled to admit recently, “Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of.”

What is involved here are the crassest lies and apologies for imperialism. With Achcar one is dealing with the finished product of the protracted evolution to the right by the political tendency known as Pabloism, which emerged over half a century ago. Breaking with Trotskyism and adapting itself to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, it insisted that these forces could replace the conscious revolutionary mobilization of the working class as the vehicle for socialism.

Now, under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and growing international class polarization, the Pablotes have rooted themselves firmly in the interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class and emerged as a political tendency whose bourgeois and pro-imperialist character is indisputable.



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