

The International Socialist Organization and the imperialist onslaught against Syria

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On May 1, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) released a statement, “Solidarity with the Syrian revolution,” signed by a politically disparate and dubious group of “Syrian, Arab and international activists”, in support of the imperialist-orchestrated conspiracy to remove the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The thoroughly reactionary and politically sinister character of this document is virtually self-evident. The ISO statement aims to provide a cynically-contrived pseudo-left cover, couched in the language of “human rights,” for a proxy war being waged by reactionary mercenary forces financed and armed by US and European imperialism. The ISO statement blatantly falsifies the character of both Syria’s Islamist opposition and US war aims in the Middle East, functioning as a propaganda instrument of power politics.

The timing of the statement’s publication is politically significant. It occurs in the midst of an escalating propaganda campaign in the American and European media to prepare public opinion for direct military intervention in Syria and the installation of a puppet regime in Damascus. The day after the statement appeared, Israeli air strikes hit the Syrian capital.

The circumstances surrounding the production of this document, which emerged out of a gathering of the World Social Forum in March, stink to high hell. The World Social Forum is a “left” political front of hundreds of organizations operating in the orbit of major corporate-financed think tanks with connections to state intelligence agencies.

Held in Tunis, the World Social Forum offered middle class pseudo-left organizations the opportunity to rub shoulders, share drinks, and discuss mutual interests and strategies with scores of state intelligence operatives and established bourgeois politicians. The Tunis event was attended by the US Agency for International Development, which has a record of fronting for CIA operations in Asia and Latin America, and the think tanks of Germany’s two leading bourgeois parties, the Social Democratic Party’s Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Christian Democratic Union’s Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. An especially prominent figure at the gathering was Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a leading right-wing figure in the German SPD who served as foreign minister between 2005 and 2009 in the coalition government of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

It requires no great political insight to recognize that the Tunis gathering was seen by the Obama administration and its European allies as an opportunity to orchestrate “popular” support for the escalation of its war plans in Syria. The ISO statement served this purpose.

Significantly, the ISO does not identify the authors of the statement, let alone provide details of the discussions that preceded and accompanied its drafting. Nor does it offer information on precisely how signatories were gathered.

However it was drafted, or by whom, the published statement is an exercise in political obfuscation, evasion and deceit. It begins: “The following statement, signed by intellectuals, academics, artists, and activists from more than 30 countries, reminds the world that what is

happening today is a people’s revolution for freedom and dignity—and for that reason, it should be supported by all means.”

If the world needs to be “reminded,” it is because the bloody carnage carried out in Syria by the imperialist-backed mercenaries for the last two years bears no resemblance to a “people’s revolution,” let alone one for “freedom and dignity.”

Washington, its NATO allies, and the Saudi and Qatari monarchies are waging a bloody sectarian war, using far-right Sunni Islamist militias as proxies. US officials and media admit that the opposition’s military spearhead is the Al Nusra Front, which emerged from Al Qaeda in Iraq—a terrorist group formed during the US occupation of that country—and recently pledged its loyalty to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The US government itself has reported that, by last December, Al Nusra alone had carried out nearly 600 terror bombing attacks, killing thousands of Syrian civilians. Opposition forces have themselves told major media that they loot and destroy factories, such as pharmaceutical plants and granaries around Aleppo. They are responsible for sectarian massacres, such as that in Houla one year ago and, according to UN officials, for a poison gas attack that killed dozens of people in the village of Khan al-Asal.

The sectarian politics of the US-backed opposition find expression in the bloody ranting of leading Sunni cleric Sheikh Adnan al-Arur. Demanding “harsh and painful” punishment for the minority Alawite sect, from which the Assad regime’s leading personnel is drawn, Arur pledged that if Alawites resist the opposition, “by Allah, we shall mince them in meat grinders, and we shall feed their flesh to the dogs.” So much for the ISO’s clap-trap about “freedom and dignity.”

There is no great and unfathomable mystery about what is going on in the eastern Mediterranean and Levant. The Syrian war is the latest chapter in US imperialism’s efforts—with the support of its ultra-reactionary Gulf State clients—to violently carry out a restructuring of Middle Eastern and Central Asian politics. Most clearly symbolized by Washington’s installation of neo-colonial regimes after invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, this offensive has cost untold hundreds of thousands of lives. As part of this offensive, Syria, which appeared on “Axis of Evil” lists compiled by Bush administration officials, has been in Washington’s gun sights for over a decade.

The ISO, lying through its teeth, presents this US intervention in the Middle East as progressive. It writes, “The fight in Syria is an extension of the fight for freedom regionally and worldwide. It cannot be divorced from the struggles of the Bahrainis, Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Yemenis and other peoples who have revolted against oppression and authoritarianism.”

These words are fraudulent demagogic. The ISO statement makes no attempt to explain, concretely, how the events in Syria are “an extension of the fight for freedom regionally and worldwide.” In fact, the United States is regularly launching drone strikes and murdering Yemeni insurgents. Bahraini protests are being ruthlessly suppressed by the same

regimes of the Gulf Cooperation Council that are playing a key role in financing the onslaught against Syria.

The comparison of the events in Syria to the Egyptian revolution is nothing short of obscene. The mass popular movement that unfolded in Egypt bore all the characteristics of a genuine revolution. Initial mass protests grew into a general strike, demanding the fall of Mubarak and better living standards for working people. The revolutionary movement unified Muslims and Christians participating in protests and strikes. And, in what was the surest sign of the popular and progressive character of the movement, it was opposed by American imperialism. The Obama administration supported Mubarak's attempts to crush the protests. Only after it became convinced that Mubarak could not be saved did the United States shift its counter-revolutionary tactics and promote the Muslim Brotherhood as an alternative to the old dictatorship.

Of the examples given by the ISO, there is only one that bears comparison to the ongoing struggle in Syria. The Libyan operation of 2011 was, as is now all too clear, a trial run for the intervention in Syria. Then, as now, the United States and its NATO allies backed and armed various Islamist terrorist groups to overthrow and murder Gaddafi. The outcome of that conspiracy has not been "freedom and dignity" for the Libyan masses, but the virtual destruction of society.

In the Syrian war, as in the 2011 Libyan war before it, whatever initial protests occurred were overwhelmed and utilized as a pretext for large-scale military intervention by Washington against a regime with which it had long-standing grievances. In both wars, Washington's key proxies were Sunni sectarian forces tied to Al Qaeda—veterans of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in Libya and the Al Nusra Front in Syria.

The ISO statement invents a narrative that grotesquely distorts reality. It writes, "This is a revolt that was sparked by the children of Deraa and the sit-ins and demonstrations of the youth in the cities, the peasants of the rural areas, and the dispossessed and marginalized of Syria. It is they who rallied nonviolently through protests and songs and chants, before the regime's brutal crackdown. Since then, the regime has pushed for the militarization of the Syrian nonviolent movement. As a result, young men took up arms, first out of self-defense."

In what must be one of the most bizarre uses of post-modernist jargon, the ISO attempts to rhetorically fumigate the murderous activities of Al Nusra by referring to its terror bombings as merely the "negation of the Other."

The ISO's presentation of the war is out-and-out State Department propaganda. The "militarization" of the opposition's activity in Syria was not a secondary aspect of its response to the Assad regime's actions, but the central element of a strategy of escalation and regime change agreed upon with its foreign backers.

The opposition's early June 2011 attack on Jisr al-Shughour came two days after a US-backed opposition council was established in Antalya, Turkey. Its first major campaign in Aleppo in February 2012, kicked off by a terror bombing which US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper attributed to Al Qaeda, was followed by news that US drones were overflying Syria. After the opposition campaign on Damascus in the late spring of 2012, which began with the May 10 Damascus car bombing and the May 25 Houla massacre, the *New York Times* confirmed that US intelligence was arming the opposition.

Since then, the Syrian opposition's violent character and the aid and materiel it receives from the CIA and its allies, measured in the thousands of tons, have been a matter of public record. Nonetheless, despite this assistance, the opposition has proven incapable of bringing down Assad—a fact that testifies to the lack of support for its far-right, jihadist politics.

There is no question but that Bashar al-Assad heads a repressive bourgeois regime that is guilty of countless crimes against the Syrian working class. As is the case in all the former colonial countries in the Middle East, the incapacity of the bourgeoisie to carry through a

genuinely democratic restructuring of society led to the establishment of quasi-Bonapartist dictatorial regimes, in which democratic rights were ruthlessly suppressed. However, it is a basic axiom of socialist politics that the overthrow of these regimes is the task of the working class. The struggle for democracy and socialism cannot under any circumstances be outsourced to the imperialist powers and their proxies.

A socialist perspective in Syria proceeds historically from its character as an oppressed, ex-colonial country, whose sectarian divisions are rooted in the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East—in Syria, that of the Ottoman Empire after World War I by Britain and France. The task of overcoming these sectarian tensions and securing the economic resources to ensure prosperity for all can be solved only by the unified struggle of the Middle Eastern masses for socialism. In this struggle, as Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution explains, the leading role falls to the working class, in a struggle against imperialism.

Such a struggle entails the revolutionary unification of workers in Syria, Iraq, Israel, Egypt and the Arabian peninsula across all ethnic and religious lines, the overthrow of the reactionary sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf, which monopolize most of the region's oil revenues, and a common struggle with the American and European working class against the threat of imperialist intervention.

By aligning itself with the Islamist opposition in Syria and its backers in Washington, the ISO demonstrates its hostility to all of these struggles. It is contributing to the defense of the privileges of the opposition's paymasters—the Persian Gulf royals and their US and European overlords—and to stirring the region's sectarian tensions, which are inflamed by the opposition's massacres and right-wing propaganda. The interests it is serving are not progressive, but reactionary.

The agenda behind US imperialism's drive to war was bluntly laid out in a May 6 *Wall Street Journal* editorial. It wrote, "The immediate goal would be to limit the proliferation of WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction], but the most important strategic goal continues to be to defeat Iran, our main adversary in the region. The risks of a jihadist [i.e., Al Qaeda] victory in Damascus are real, at least in the short term, but they are containable by Turkey and Israel."

That is to say, the *Journal* views an Islamist victory in Syria as a step towards Washington's key strategic goal: the defeat of the Iranian regime and the establishment of full US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. This hegemony would be exercised first of all against Washington's geopolitical rivals in Russia and China, who have supported Assad. These international conflicts underlying the Syrian war refute the ISO's claim that it is backing a revolution.

The ISO attempts to make light of its open alliance with imperialism by commenting ironically: "The Syrian revolution has confronted a world upside down, one where states that were allegedly friends of the Arabs such as Russia, China, and Iran have stood in support of the slaughter of the people, while states that never supported democracy or independence, especially the US and its Gulf allies, have intervened in support of the revolutionaries."

No, it is not the world, but the analysis of the ISO that is "upside down." Is it really necessary to explain that Wall Street, the Pentagon, the major oil firms, and the crowned heads of the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms are not fighting for a revolution? Is it not far more likely that the ISO, in keeping with the evolution of so many other pseudo-left organizations of the middle class, is pursuing a political line that is determined by the US State Department?

There is the matter of the signatories of this letter. As we have already noted, the ISO does not explain how this disparate group was rounded up and induced to politically prostitute themselves in the interests of imperialism.

Some of the signatories, such as Tariq Ali, Gilbert Achcar, Sherry Wolf and Michael Löwy, have long associations with the reactionary political

intrigues of the rightward-moving pseudo-left parties. Many, however, have doubtless been roped in under the fraudulent banner of human rights—and have signed the declaration, probably without even reading it and without any serious knowledge of what is taking place in Syria. Such individuals should reconsider their association with this reactionary pro-war propaganda exercise and have their names removed from the list of signatories.

As for the ISO, it has irrevocably and comprehensively exposed itself as an instrument of US imperialism, using lies and euphemisms to drum up support for aggression against Syria. It is a political accessory to the crimes being committed against the Syrian people, and a direct accomplice of imperialism.



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