

The International Socialist Organization agitates for war with Russia over Syria

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Major crises of the global capitalist order unmask the character of political organizations. The war in Syria has exposed the International Socialist Organization (ISO) as an instrument of pro-war propaganda, agitating relentlessly for an escalation of US military operations in support of forces fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. No one who carefully reads socialistworker.org, the ISO's web site, will fail to notice the relationship between its Syria postings and ongoing conflicts within the Obama administration over the scale of US involvement in the war.

To put the matter bluntly, the ISO is aligned with, and conducts propaganda on behalf of, factions within the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party, as well as an array of NGOs and foreign policy think tanks, which are dissatisfied with the Obama administration's failure to confront Russian backing for Assad and complete the destruction of his regime. The ISO's specific job is to legitimize and generate broader support for US escalation by portraying the CIA-organized regime-change operation as a "revolution."

In a March 10 piece, "Syria's revolutionaries return to the street," Ashley Smith hails protests in Syrian cities and towns controlled, at least in part, by US-backed opposition forces. He writes, "These demonstrations have come as a surprise to many, especially those on the left who have denounced the Syrian revolution as an American plot designed to install a pro-US client regime in Damascus."

Smith cites pictures on the pro-opposition Syria Freedom Forever web site showing protesters holding up signs hailing the war as a struggle for freedom and women's rights. He does so in order to criticize the Obama administration's unwillingness to back the opposition more aggressively.

Smith writes, "Outfoxed by Russia and fearing that the wave of refugees could provoke a political crisis in the EU, the US brokered the recent ceasefire. Having abandoned its demand for Assad to immediately step down, the US has organized a new round of peace talks set to begin March 10 in Geneva. But the Syrian people have other plans in mind—to continue the revolution. The stunning display of resilience by Syria's revolutionaries amid incredibly difficult conditions is a rebuke to all those who declared the Syrian revolution as 'jihadist' and/or 'pro-US.'"

Mr. Smith has moved quite a distance in his evaluation of the conflict in Syria over the past four years. In 2012, he argued that the Obama administration's purpose in Syria was to secure regime-change—on the model of the bloody 2011 NATO war for regime-change in Libya carried out in alliance with Islamist forces—so as to install a puppet government in Damascus.

In an essay entitled "Obama's New Imperialist Strategy," published in the May 2012 issue of the ISO's *International Socialist Review*, Smith presented an extensive analysis of the administration's efforts to maintain the hegemonic position of the United States. A substantial portion of Smith's essay was devoted to exposing the imperialist interests underlying the US intervention in Syria. Under the subhead "Proxy War in Syria," he wrote:

In Syria, Obama is intent on weakening if not replacing Iran's ally, Bashar al-Assad. In many ways, he is following the Libya script. Up until recently, both the United States and Israel had tolerated Assad's regime and relied upon it to keep peace on the Israeli border. Now, however, Obama is trying to hijack the revolutionary movement against the regime to serve US aims.

Obama has hypocritically criticized the Assad regime of repression of the country's population, while he has been mute about allies' similar behavior. The United States has mobilized the Arab League to organize regional pressure to force Assad to step down. They have also found a section of the resistance, the Syrian National Council, which is eager to collaborate with the United States. At an Istanbul meeting of the US-backed formations, Friends of Syria, America's Arab allies promised \$100 million to sponsor its selected resistance fighters and the United States pledged to provide communications equipment to help those forces evade the Syrian military.

Obama has attempted to use the R2P doctrine to win UN approval for the United States and its allies to pursue regime change in the country. Certainly, they along with Israel do not support a genuine revolution, but merely superficial change that would replace Assad's Iranian allied regime with one aligned with the United States. However, unlike in Libya, both China and Russia have signaled opposition to the US policy. They united in a joint veto in the UN Security Council that would have approved an Arab League plan for Assad to give up power. Nevertheless, the United States and its allies are giving millions of dollars in "nonlethal" aid to the Syrian opposition, and is discussing the possibility of arming it.

This analysis put Smith at odds with many of the statements on Syria issued at that time by the ISO, which was arguing that Syrian "revolutionaries" should accept arms and backing from Washington. Since then, the forces that set the political line of the ISO have intervened. Mr. Smith was persuaded to feed his previous line into the office shredder and hail the instruments of regime-change as the vanguard of a popular revolution.

In a piece posted March 1 on Socialistworker.org titled "How was Syria turned into hell on earth," Smith bitterly attacks the Obama administration. Turning reality on its head, he asserts that Obama's policy, which he depicts as quasi-pacifist, has allowed Russia and China to emerge as imperialist powers allied with Assad.

The idea of Washington "abandoning" Syria or the Middle East to anyone outrages Smith. "Russian imperialism took advantage of America's weakened position to intervene directly in Syria, and explicitly in support of the regime," Smith fumes, warning, "Russia and China also have imperialist stakes in the region."

Smith agitates for Washington to protect the opposition from the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies: “Now, however, the US seems ready to capitulate to Russia’s demand that Assad remain in power as the joint war on ISIS continues. It has already failed to challenge Russia’s intervention when it plainly was directed toward helping the Syrian regime regain the initiative against rebel forces... Unless something changes, this will be a geopolitical victory for Russian imperialism and Assad’s counterrevolution against what remains of the Syrian Spring.”

Smith’s essay could have been posted on any number of right-wing Neocon web sites. There should be no mistaking what Smith is demanding in Syria as he denounces the danger of a “geopolitical victory for Russian imperialism.” To swing the balance of forces back towards the US-supported Islamists, despite the military superiority of the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies, would require a large-scale attack by NATO, aimed above all at Russian warplanes and missile forces. It would mean launching all-out war between nuclear-armed powers.

Smith is calling for stepped-up support to opposition militias in Syria, fully aware that these are reactionary Islamist forces. While his March 10 article dishonestly attacks those who point to the “jihadist” character of the Islamist opposition in Syria, his March 1 article acknowledges the role of Islamist and Al Qaeda forces in the opposition and advocates supporting it anyway:

Syrian revolutionaries had no choice but to take up arms in self-defense. They formed an estimated 1,000 militias, won over the Sunni rank and file within the Syrian military, and forged the Free Syrian Army [FSA]... *Various Islamist forces emerged within the revolution. Some were accepted as part of it; some competed with the LCCs [opposition Local Coordination Committees] and the FSA from outside, but still fought the regime; others, like the Al Qaeda franchise, the Al Nusra Front, sometimes came into conflict with the FSA while also clashing with the regime.* [Emphasis added].

Smith acknowledges that the FSA is a tool of US imperialism and its allies, but devises an ingenious apology for this fact:

The US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar funded the FSA. But they never supported the revolution. The US never provided the heavy weaponry, like anti-aircraft MANPADS, that the FSA needed to defend their cities against Assad’s air force.

In fact, Washington refused to give the opposition “man-portable air defense systems” (MANPADS) along with the bombs, anti-tank missiles and small arms it was providing because it feared Al Qaeda would use them to shoot down civilian jetliners.

The central element in Smith’s brief for escalating the war in Syria, among its lies and contradictions, is the assertion that Russia’s post-Soviet capitalist oligarchy is “imperialist.” This definition has been arrived at not through a historical analysis of the development of Russian capitalism, but rather in accordance with the propaganda needs of the ISO’s pro-war agenda. It is a crass attempt to legitimize wars waged by the major imperialist powers and their efforts to destabilize and even dismember Russia itself.

The policies pursued by the Putin regime in Syria arise from the desperate international situation confronting Russia in the aftermath of the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In 2011, the Kremlin allowed itself to be persuaded to approve a UN

Security Council resolution sanctioning action against the Libyan regime, a Russian ally, on the grounds that an intervention was necessary to protect protesting civilians in Benghazi from being massacred by the Libyan government. This led to the NATO bombing of Libya, the destruction of the Gaddafi regime and the torture and murder of Gaddafi himself in the bombed-out remains of his hometown, Sirte.

It soon became clear that NATO’s rape of Libya was only the beginning of a global offensive against Russian interests. The escalation of the war against Syria, Russia’s main Arab ally and the site of its only naval base in the Mediterranean, was followed by the 2014 NATO-backed coup in Kiev that toppled a pro-Russian government and installed a NATO puppet regime in Ukraine. Then came the imposition of punishing economic sanctions against Russia and the wave of NATO military exercises along Russia’s borders in Eastern Europe and in the Baltic and Black seas.

When Turkey, a NATO member state, threatened last year to invade Syria, the Kremlin identified this as an existential threat to Russian national interests and decided to take military action to prevent the consummation of the US-NATO regime-change operation. The Kremlin’s escalation, which brings the world closer to all-out war, is an attempt by nationalist factions of the new Russian bourgeoisie, led by Putin, to stave off a geopolitical disaster. The methods employed by the Russian regime, determined by its class nature, are politically reactionary.

The Kremlin is trying to harness the residual military strength it inherited from the Soviet Union to block the NATO powers from exploiting the weaknesses of the reactionary post-Soviet regime. These include not only its dependence on financial centers in the imperialist countries, but also its incitement of Russian nationalism and anti-Muslim prejudice. The latter policy inflames ethnic and sectarian divisions within Russia, which, since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, have repeatedly erupted into bloody wars in constituent republics of the Russian Federation such as Chechnya and Dagestan.

The toppling in 1992 of the regime in Afghanistan that had been backed by the Soviet Union, followed by the emergence of a series of Islamist regimes that initially enjoyed US backing, transformed that country into a support base for Islamist forces fighting inside Russia, including in Chechnya. With thousands of Chechens fighting as part of the anti-Assad opposition in Syria today, the Kremlin fears that the US overthrow of Assad would transform Syria into a guerrilla base for inciting civil war in Russia.

In relationship to these forces, the labeling of Russia as an “imperialist” power fighting the Islamist opposition in Syria serves an additional political function. The ISO is legitimizing military operations within Russia itself. It is providing fuel for arguments that Chechen separatists and similar Islamist forces are revolutionaries, fighting for independence against an imperialist oppressor state.

The ISO is aware that its support for US escalation in Syria has aroused widespread suspicion that it is functioning in the interests of US imperialism. Attempting to counter these suspicions, Socialistworker.org has posted a comment by Stanley Heller, the executive director of the Middle East Crisis Committee in Connecticut, entitled “The left’s false logic on Syria.” Heller attacks anger and disillusionment with war in the American population.

He writes, “I want to deal with one argument that goes something like this: ‘The main enemy is at home. I have to pay taxes that support US imperialism—that should be my main concern.’ I agree up to a point... But increasingly, the ‘main enemy’ reasoning is being used to mean that the *only* thing we should deal with is US government interventions and crimes. That’s so screwed up. It’s a betrayal of people who are or should be our friends.” [Emphasis in the original].

What is “screwed up” is not opposition to imperialist war, but the ISO’s rationale for a war in Syria that could result in the destruction of the entire planet, based on the argument that Islamist militias backed by the CIA and

tied to Al Qaeda are “friends” of the American people.

After cynically declaring that he expects “to be accused of being naïve at best and neo-con slime at worst,” Heller lays out his plan for a propaganda campaign against Russia and Iran. He calls for a boycott Russian and Iranian products and media outlets. He calls upon *Socialist Worker’s* readers to “correct the narrative being spread by pro-Assad writers... we’re hearing a liberal-left narrative that says the Saudis started the violence in Syria in coordination with the US.”

Finally, he calls for protests in front of Russian and Iranian consulates and embassies. At these events, Heller adds, protesters should “bring signs about US and Saudi outrages, to discourage attendance by rightists.”

Heller’s awareness that the demonstrations he is proposing might attract explicitly right-wing forces testifies to the consciously reactionary role of the ISO and its allies. Heller is proposing pro-war protests inciting anti-Russian chauvinism. His proposal to project superficial opposition to US policy by bringing anti-US and anti-Saudi signs is a ploy, designed primarily to prevent the attendance of right-wing forces at ISO rallies from exposing too directly the ISO’s reactionary sympathies.

Heller makes clear that, notwithstanding his cynical suggestion that the ISO include a few anti-Saudi posters at his proposed anti-Iranian rallies, he supports US imperialism and the Saudi monarchy against Russia, Iran and the Assad regime. “True,” he writes, “Saudi Arabia has funded jihadis, among other militias, but the Saudis and the US are only the number-three culprit in creating the Syrian disaster. Assad is clearly number one, and his allies are number two.”

By publishing such remarks, the ISO is functioning as an open ally of US imperialism and confirming its role as a political accessory to crimes against the people of Syria.



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