

By their friends you will know them: The International Socialist Organization and American imperialism

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The International Socialist Organization functions as an arm of the State Department in the milieu of pseudo-left politics in the United States. It is playing a central role in legitimizing and campaigning for US military intervention in Syria, under the guise of promoting the “Syrian democratic revolution,” which has been financed and organized by the CIA.

The ISO’s online publication *Socialist Worker* regularly publishes articles by Ashley Smith and others that promote the US-backed Syrian opposition, uncritically report US-organized provocations in Syria, and slander anyone opposing imperialist intervention as a supporter of the bourgeois nationalist government of Bashar al-Assad.

With the Syrian civil war, the alignment of the ISO with the foreign policy of the American ruling class, and its close connections to individuals with high-level positions in think tanks and organizations tied to the state, has become undeniable.

A case in point is the recent volume put out by Haymarket Books, the publishing arm of the ISO, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, by Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Saleh was a longtime member of the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) who is now a leading proponent of the “Syrian Revolution.” He currently serves as a fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study in Germany.

The book itself is a political whitewash of the “Syrian Revolution,” which is presented as a spontaneous and “popular” uprising with no connection to the outside world—and, particularly, with no connection to the American government. The United States is referred to only twice in Saleh’s text, in passing, and Obama is not mentioned at all. The book is an exercise in political cover-up, obscuring the history and evolution of the US-backed civil war in Syria.

On the back of the book appear four recommendations that expose the real politics not only of the author, but of the ISO. Above the imprint of Haymarket Books and below the inscription, “The leading intellectual voice of the Syrian Revolution recounts the devastating impact of Assad’s tyrannical rule,” appear quotes from four individuals that clearly show with whom the ISO is collaborating in the propagation of its government line.

The four blurbs, in order, are:

1) **Diana Darke**, author of *My House in Damascus*: “A searing and heartfelt critique of a crisis which is no longer just Syria’s, but the world’s. Yassin al-Haj Saleh is recognized as ‘the conscience of the Syrian Revolution.’ No other voice has such clarity or integrity.”

The ISO identifies Darke as simply the author of *My House in Damascus*, but she is much more. After graduating from Wadham College, Oxford in 1977, Darke went to work for the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), a British government spy agency that, according to its webpage, “strives to keep Britain safe and secure by working with our partners in the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and

MI5.” The GCHQ became infamous in 2014 after leaks by Edward Snowden exposed its involvement with the US National Security Agency in spying on the world’s population.

In other words, Darke is (or at least was) an agent of British intelligence. She also worked for Racal Electronics plc, once the third largest British electronics firm, as an Arabic consultant.

On November 26, 2016, Darke published a column on her blog urging Trump to “harness his business acumen to steer the ultimate deal for peace in Syria and the wider Middle East that no politician before him has achieved.” On April 7, 2017, Darke wrote an article in the London *Times Literary Supplement* praising missile strikes launched by the Trump administration following a CIA-orchestrated provocation over alleged sarin gas attacks by the Assad regime. “Trump... has stunned the world with the speed of his reaction,” Darke wrote, before wondering whether Trump would follow through with a wider campaign.

Darke concluded her column: “It has always been delusional to think that Assad could be part of the solution to the future of Syria – the best outcome from this sarin attack would be that his arrogance has derailed his own rehabilitation. That at least would be a first step in the right direction. Meanwhile Trump’s decisive action will stop sarin attacks from becoming the new normal in the Middle East.”

More recently, Darke penned a column for the *Guardian* bemoaning that “it is far too late for the west and the international community to intervene militarily in Syria—that should have been done in 2011, or 2013 at the latest, before Islamic State or Russia came in to fill the lawless vacuum we ignored.” Having failed to intervene aggressively enough with military force, the US and Western powers must now “keep up all forms of pressure on the Assad regime and Putin, to make both feel the heat.”

2) **Charles Lister**, author of *The Syrian Jihad*: “A personal journey through the ecstasy and the heartbreak of Syria’s revolution and the many struggles the country has faced since. There is no better voice to tell this book’s many important stories and Saleh’s words are likely to live on for years to come.”

Charles Lister is likewise more than just the author of *The Syrian Jihad*. He is a senior fellow and director of the Extremism and Counterterrorism Program at the Middle East Institute (MEI), a right-wing, pro-imperialist think tank founded in 1946 by George Camp Keiser and Christian Herter, a former secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration.

The chairman of the MEI is Richard A. Clarke, who worked in the State Department under Reagan, chaired the counter-terrorism security team under George H.W. Bush, served as the chief counter-terrorism advisor on the National Security Council under Clinton, and, until 2003, was the special advisor to the president for cybersecurity under George W. Bush. An honorary chairman at the MEI is retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, and its president is Wendy Chamberlain, US ambassador

to Pakistan during the initial stages of the war against Afghanistan.

According to Lister's biography posted on the MEI website, prior to joining the MEI he "was a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Qatar and a Senior Consultant to the multinational-backed Syria Track II Dialogue Initiative, where he managed nearly three years of intensive face-to-face engagement with the leaderships of over 100 Syrian armed opposition groups."

On February 6, 2018, Lister gave testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the recently announced policy of the Trump administration on Syria, praising indications that the administration was planning a more aggressive intervention in Syria, but demanding still more aggressive action.

Trump's secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, Lister stated, had outlined a "five-part strategic vision, in which US national security interests would be best secured by achieving five grand – and I should say, laudable – objectives: (1) the lasting defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda and any other terrorist threat to the US at home or overseas; (2) the resolution of Syria's broader conflict through a UN-led political process that secures the departure of President Bashar al-Assad; (3) the diminishment of Iranian influence in Syria; (4) the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced peoples; and (5) a Syria free of weapons of mass destruction."

Trump's policy, Lister went on to state, "closely mirrors how the Obama administration publicly framed its own policy on Syria, and in that sense, not much has changed. However, the Obama administration's handling of Syria was a tale of tragedy and frustration – a story of opportunities missed, deals not done, disasters not averted, and of influence and credibility lost. So, will this, apparently new US strategy be any different in its implementation? Much attention was rightfully given to Secretary Tillerson's declaration that the US 'will maintain a military presence in Syria' and that 'it is vital for the US to remain engaged in Syria... a total withdrawal of American personnel at this time would restore Assad and continue his brutal treatment against his own people.'

"While the Trump administration should be praised for bringing some policy clarity to an issue of significant strategic concern, Secretary Tillerson's speech raised many more questions than it provided answers."

3) **Steven Heydemann**, professor of Middle East studies and author of *Authoritarianism in Syria*: "Yassin al-Haj Saleh is one of Syria's most important public intellectuals. Saleh's criticism of extremism, dictatorship, and the effects of mass violence on Syrian society offers a powerful and compelling response to the traumas that define the Syrian experience."

Beyond being a professor of Middle East Studies at Smith College in Massachusetts, Heydemann is a nonresident senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, a leading imperialist think tank in Washington headed by John Allen, a retired US Marine Corps general and former commander of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan under Obama. Allen previously held several high-level positions at the US Institute of Peace, a government institution created by Reagan in 1984, the board of which is appointed by the president.

In July 2012, Heydemann spoke at the Middle East Policy Council's 68th Capitol Hill Conference on the "Crisis in Syria: What are the US Options?" The MEPC is a Washington-based think tank formerly headed by Frank Anderson, a longtime CIA agent, and George McGovern, the Democratic Party congressman and 1972 presidential candidate. Until his death this past September, the organization was headed by Ford Fraker, former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia under Bush and Obama and former senior advisor for the Middle East with Bank of America Merrill Lynch.

According to the MEPC's summary of Heydemann's remarks, he "suggested broadening US engagement with the opposition by establishing a more serious framework for how the international

community can support the uprising. He also spoke on how those arming the Free Syrian Army—namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar—can better coordinate their efforts."

More recently, in March 2016, Heydemann wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, "Why the United States hasn't intervened in Syria," in which he criticized the Obama administration's "deep cognitive bias against risk" in Syria and argued that "more robust US support for moderate armed groups [i.e., those backed by the ISO] might well have stemmed processes of radicalization that were principally instrumental and not ideological."

In May 2017, Heydemann wrote an article for the *Atlantic Council* (another highly connected Washington think tank) that gives insight into the financial considerations of the ISO and the organizations within Syria with which it is aligned. After supporting Trump's "abrupt about-face on Assad following the April 7 [2017] missile strikes," Heydemann advocated an expansion of US and European assistance to Syrian opposition forces. However, he said this had to be done through "funding channels that are beyond the regime's control" and by working with "Syrian partners selected through independent vetting processes, including local NGOs, local councils, and internationally-supported agencies such as the Syria Recovery Trust Fund."

4) **Leila al-Shami**, coauthor of *Burning Country, Syrians in Revolution and War*: "One of Syria's most engaging revolutionary thinkers, Saleh provides valuable context to a democratic revolution and vicious counterrevolution which has often been willfully misunderstood. Combining expert analysis and powerful personal testimony, this book is indispensable."

The final recommendation comes from an individual whose rhetoric more directly corresponds to that of the ISO. Al-Shami is the coauthor of *Burning Country, Syrians in Revolution and War* with Robin Yassin-Kassab, who wrote the introduction to Saleh's book, *The Impossible Revolution*. As with the ISO, al-Shami has specialized in providing a pseudo-left critique of anyone opposing imperialist intervention in Syria—that is, in reframing the openly imperialist policy of Darke, Lister and Heydemann in pseudo-radical phraseology.

In one of the most recent articles published on her blog, "The 'anti-imperialism' of idiots," al-Shami begins by declaring that "Once more the western 'anti-war' movement has awoken to mobilise around Syria." The source of her ire is opposition to the US-UK-French bombing of Syrian cities following the CIA-orchestrated campaign over an alleged chemical weapons attack on the Syrian city of Douma.

After slandering opponents of imperialist intervention for displaying "deeply authoritarian tendencies" and for being "pro-fascist" for supposedly supporting the bourgeois nationalist regime of Bashar al-Assad, al-Shami declares that she "no longer [has] an answer" for what to do in Syria, but that the desperate situation in the country "causes many Syrians to welcome the US, UK and France's action and who now see foreign intervention as their only hope, despite the risks they know it entails."

Al-Shami concludes: "One thing is for sure—I won't lose any sleep over targeted strikes aimed at regime military bases and chemical weapons plants which may provide Syrians with a short respite from the daily killing. And I will never see people who place grand narratives over lived realities, who support brutal regimes in far off countries, or who peddle racism, conspiracy theories and atrocity denial, as allies."

In other words, imperialist intervention in Syria should be welcomed, and all those who oppose it are peddlers of racism and conspiracy theories.

Such is the politics of the International Socialist Organization. The ISO has absolutely nothing to do with Marxism, and its "socialist" rhetoric is no more than a cover for bourgeois, imperialist politics. It is a pseudo-left organization of the upper-middle class that seeks to divert young people

opposed to capitalism behind powerful factions of the American military-intelligence apparatus.



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