

Rohini Hensman's *Indefensible*: The ISO discovers its muse—the CIA—Part 1

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The following article is the first part of a four-part review of Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism.

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Rohini Hensman's book *Indefensible*, issued by the International Socialist Organization's (ISO) Haymarket Books publishing house, is a full-throated endorsement of imperialist war. Trotting out the tired lies of the US and European media, that the Syrian war is a "democratic revolution," it comes down in favor of virtually every war or overseas operation launched by the Democratic Party since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Hensman's Orwellian arguments tend inescapably in one direction: that US wars have been the main liberating force during the last quarter century.

The bulk of *Indefensible* consists of vitriolic attacks on left-wing and socialist opponents of war. Hensman is a Tamil author and activist who lives in India and claims a Sri Lankan Maoist family background. She has ties to the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI). In her book, she denounces journalists John Pilger and Seymour Hersh, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), published by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

This reactionary undertaking has brought together a significant layer of pro-war academics and middle class, pro-imperialist parties. These include the ISO's Haymarket Books, financed by corporate outfits like the Lannan Foundation; Professor Gilbert Achcar of France's Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), who led *Indefensible's* book launch in London; and Professor Michael Karadjis, of the Pabloite Socialist Alliance (SA) group in Australia.

The publication of *Indefensible* vindicates the ICFI's analysis that these are not left-wing parties, but reactionary pseudo-left organizations of the affluent middle class. Hensman's arguments—based on the writings of Achcar, Karadjis and others—mark a new and decisive stage in the evolution of these groups. Having embraced the imperialist wars in Libya and Syria in 2011, they are now emerging as conscious defenders of imperialist war, in general, against criticism from the left. The perspective underlying the struggle for socialism emerges, however, from the Trotskyist critique of these groups.

Hensman defends NATO's war in Syria

Presenting herself as an observer outraged by the bloodshed in Syria, Hensman writes: "Ending the Syria crisis would entail, first and foremost, identifying its causes. For some of those who call themselves anti-imperialists, there is only one cause: Western (that is, North American and Western European) imperialism, which is responsible for all the

bloodshed—including the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)..."

In fact, US and European imperialism started and continue to bear overwhelming responsibility for the Syrian war. Hensman, however, slanders opponents of NATO's war as tools of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin: "I shall refer to these supporters of Assad and Putin as 'pseudo-anti-imperialists.'" She writes, "Syria typifies the moral and political degeneration of pseudo-anti-imperialists who support, or fail to oppose, the genocidal crushing of a democratic uprising by a totalitarian state allied with Iranian and Russian imperialism."

Chief among the targets of Hensman's pro-war outrage is the ICFI. Citing a 2013 statement published on the WSWS, "The International Socialist Organization and the imperialist onslaught against Syria," she denounces the ICFI and the WSWS for not hailing the CIA-backed Islamist militias as democratic revolutionaries:

The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) of the International Committee of the Fourth International goes further in its support of Assad. When on May 1, 2013 over two hundred intellectuals, academics, artists and activists from more than thirty countries issued a statement beginning, 'We, the undersigned, stand in solidarity with the millions of Syrians who have been struggling for dignity and freedom since March 2011. We call on the people of the world to pressure the Syrian regime to end its oppression of and war on the Syrian people' (Socialist Worker 2013), the WSWS responded by alleging that 'the thoroughly reactionary and politically sinister character of this document is virtually self-evident'—since, in their view, there are no Syrians struggling against Assad for freedom and dignity, only Islamist extremists and imperialists (North and Lantier 2013). The WSWS covers up Assad's slaughter of the democratic opposition and their families and communities by repeating his propaganda that these people... never existed, and, thereby, collude in the massacres.

The forces colluding in a massacre are not the opponents of NATO wars, but war propagandists like Hensman and the ISO. Having promoted right-wing militias, funded by the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, as the heroes of a revolution "for freedom and dignity," they have ended up embracing Washington's bloody rampage across the Middle East.

In the spring of 2011, after mass working-class uprisings toppled US-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, a protest movement began in Syrian cities like Deraa, Hama and Homs—parts of which have historically supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Whatever mixture of forces may have participated in the initial protests, they were soon dominated by CIA-backed Islamists. A year into the war, in 2012, the US government

itself reported that the opposition militias were led by the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front, which had, by itself, carried out nearly 600 bombing attacks and killed thousands of civilians.

The WSWS had exposed these ties and refuted the claims that, simply because the Syrian war erupted after the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, it was a revolution against dictatorship. In the 2013 article attacked by Hensman, it explained:

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 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.

This analysis has been entirely vindicated. What unfolded in Syria was not a revolution but a bloody, sectarian war, in which NATO mobilized Sunni Islamist militias against the Shiite Alawite-led Assad regime. There was never a general strike mobilizing the working class against the Syrian regime—an event that, as in Egypt or Tunisia, brings even the most bloodstained, repressive regime to a standstill—but a series of reactionary provocations.

The ICFI has never given any political support to Assad, who rules over a reactionary regime of the Syrian bourgeoisie. It insisted, however, that Assad's overthrow was the task of the Syrian working class, and not the Pentagon, its European allies and the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms. It stressed that, like the illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003, it was a war pursuing an imperialist agenda: to establish US hegemony over the strategic, oil-rich Middle East; destroy Syria as an Iranian ally; and weaken Russia by eliminating its sole surviving Arab ally and only Mediterranean Sea naval base.

Hensman presents not a shred of evidence to refute these points. Instead, she floods the reader with propaganda claims that mass uprisings were taking place in Syria, and that Assad had to be toppled at all costs, including by supporting US wars. Her sources turn out to be pro-war corporate media outlets, anonymous blogs citing unverifiable evidence, or mouthpieces for US intelligence that have already been exposed and discredited.

The most infamous provocations were media campaigns to justify direct NATO military action in Syria, with lurid and false claims that Assad had used chemical weapons against civilians. Claims that Assad organized

poison gas attacks at Houla in May 2012, Khan al-Asal in March 2013, and Ghouta in August 2013 were refuted by investigations by Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the UN, and journalist Seymour Hersh and the UN, respectively. They identified the opposition militias working with various NATO powers as the culprits, who mounted gas attacks and blamed them on Assad in order to justify a direct US attack on Syria.

Hensman dishonestly tries to blame the Ghouta attack on Assad. She does not actually claim or provide evidence that Assad organized the Ghouta attack, or admit that the other allegations of Syrian poison gas attacks proved to be false. Instead, she tries to smear Hersh as an Assad puppet and blacken his name, in order to make the false allegations against the Syrian regime in Ghouta seem more credible.

She cites former US Secret Service official Dan Kaszeta, whom she only identifies, blandly, as a "chemical weapons expert" though he works for the UK-backed Bellingcat blog: "There are many ways to make sarin, and it appears to me that the way the regime went about it correlates very closely with the physical evidence reported by the original UN/OPCW inspection team" in Ghouta. She then cites an anonymous pro-Syrian war blog, Linux Beach: "Seymour Hersh has enjoyed a long relationship with Bashar al-Assad ... Seymour M. Hersh wants Assad to win."

Hensman berates other journalists, critical of the war in Syria, for not trawling through pro-war blogs to discover the revolution she claims is taking place, and more aggressively making the case for a direct US attack on Syria. If they had seen these blogs, she writes, they "would have come across a photograph of Syrians holding up a banner responding to Obama's patronising and ignorant refusal to arm the Syrian opposition, which says, 'Yes, Mr President Obama! Dentists, farmers and students are the ones who lead dignity revolutions; criminals kill while idiots talk' (Karadjis 2014)."

This propaganda is grotesque. A "dignity revolution," appealing for US military intervention and mobilizing a group of dentists as its leading force, is not a socialist revolution by the working class. And each time Hensman purports to provide evidence that a mass uprising is ongoing in Syria, it turns out to be an empty fraud.

A case in point is her quoting of allegations regarding Assad's repression of initial protests in Syria by Yasmeen Mobayed, a New York University graduate student, who works with US-backed Kurdish militias fighting in Syria: "Thousands of documented political detainees have been tortured to death at the hands of Assad forces. Recently, a defected regime photographer, who goes by the pseudonym 'Caesar,' leaked 55,000 images of over 11,000 tortured civilian detainees."

Mobayed's reliance on "Caesar" to substantiate her argument that a revolution was underway undermines her entire account. "Caesar" is neither an objective nor credible source.

An operative who had been working with Syrian opposition militias since 2011, "Caesar" met with a group of human rights investigators funded by the oil sheikdom of Qatar, in an unnamed Middle East country in 2014. He said he had 55,000 pictures of 11,000 Syrian prisoners on a flash drive, but refused to provide the investigators access to these pictures. Ultimately, they reported, "Some 5,500 images were examined in total by the forensics team ... Within these 5,500 images, images of a total of 835 deceased persons were evaluated in detail. Of these, 20 percent showed evidence of inflicted trauma and 30 percent were equivocal. Forty-two percent showed emaciation."

As "Caesar" also smudged out time and date stamps on the pictures he released, it was impossible to verify who these 835 victims were, and when and where they were detained and killed. The photos leaked by "Caesar" do not, in fact, provide evidence for anything besides investigators' assertions that 835 individuals were horrifically treated by unidentified persons.

Hensman uses these, however, to blame all the carnage in Syria on Assad and to justify her calls to escalate the war. She even blames the

Assad regime for the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a Sunni Islamist terror militia that arose in 2013–2014 and attacked, not only Assad’s forces, but also the US puppet regime in neighboring Iraq. Citing Britain’s right-wing *Daily Telegraph* and a motley crew of ISIS defectors to the US war effort, she writes:

Assad decided to ally with ISIS, the most extreme of the Islamist groups. While secular rebels continued to be pounded unmercifully, ‘We were confident that the regime would not bomb us,’ an ISIS defector said. ... And as a rebel fighter linked to the Muslim Brotherhood claimed, the regime ‘pay[s] more than 150m Syrian lire [£1.4m] monthly to Jabhat al-Nusra to guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines in Baniyas and Latakia. Middlemen trusted by both sides are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organization.’ Indeed, as a *Telegraph* article reported, Assad’s regime was not simply buying oil from ISIS but running oil and gas plants in cooperation with them. ...

Compared to the wealth of evidence that the bulk of ISIS funding came from within Syria and that most of it was from oil and gas deals with the Assad regime, there is little evidence of ISIS funding from or oil deals with other countries. ... As for funding from the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, while individuals from these countries might fund ISIS, state support has gone to militant groups that are at war with ISIS; in other words, it seems safe to ‘blame Assad first for ISIS’ rise’ (Rowell 2014).

Hensman also attacks the WWSWS on this issue, writing: “North and Lantier are silent on Assad’s promotion of ISIS, and his ceding of Syria’s sovereignty to the Islamic state of Iran.”

The origins of ISIS lie in the international Islamist recruitment networks developed by the NATO powers and their Persian Gulf allies during the 1981–1989 Soviet-Afghan War. These were revived to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters to the Syrian war today, along with the sectarian militias used to suppress resistance to the 2003–2011 US occupation of Iraq. Fighters from across Europe, Central Asia, Pakistan, Russia, China, Australia and North America traveled to fight in Syria. As the Syrian war developed, these forces developed ties with Sunni Islamist militias in neighboring Iraq.

It is a documented fact that ISIS received state funding from NATO powers, including France, the former colonial power in Syria, which funneled millions of euros to ISIS via construction firm Lafarge. Combined with funding from unofficial Saudi sources that Hensman does not deny, this makes clear that ISIS was supported by governments seeking to topple Assad.

Assad did not, it is true, end oil purchases from ISIS-held oil fields, as this would have cut off energy supplies to Syrian cities. But when the Syrian regime, assisted later by its Russian and Iranian allies, tried to attack ISIS and take back the oil fields, they were bombarded by US forces that intervened to protect ISIS.

The reason Hensman perpetrates political fraud is not difficult to comprehend. NATO and Persian Gulf support for ISIS, which ran death squads and published videos of mass executions of civilians, shows that Hensman’s entire theory of the war—that it is a war for liberation led by imperialism—is a lie. Her invocation of morality as a reason for backing imperialist wars of plunder and their Islamist proxies deserves nothing but contempt.

Their political and moral degeneracy is epitomized by Michael Karadjis’ defense of “moderate” Islamist opposition militias, like the Farouq Brigades. Khalid al-Hamad, Farouq Brigades leader, is infamous for desecrating the corpse of a Syrian soldier, biting into his internal

organs in a YouTube fundraising video designed to impress the CIA and wealthy donors in the Persian Gulf sheikdoms. Karadjis, whom Hensman cites as an authority on Syria, downplayed this notorious video, claiming it was only “minor cannibalism.”

As Hensman hysterically attacks the WWSWS, she becomes entangled in the contradictions of her own argument and ends up tacitly justifying Assad’s policy in the war. She writes:

The intervention of David North and Alex Lantier on the World Socialist Web Site (2013) also echoes the anti-Muslim bigotry that has become the hallmark of the neo-fascist right. By characterising the entire Syrian opposition to Assad as ‘Islamist’, it ignores non-Muslim dissidents and blurs the distinction between four distinct categories of Muslims who oppose him. The first category designates Muslim believers who are secular and progressive. The second is composed of Muslim fundamentalists (‘Salafis’) who, despite their beliefs, want to live in a secular state. ...The third category is composed of political Islamists who want to establish an Islamic state through elections. These are potentially dangerous, because they inevitably undermine democratic rights and freedoms if they do come to power, so they have to be opposed both ideologically and politically. The fourth category consists of political Islamists who want to establish an Islamic state through violence. They should be put behind bars if possible, and it may be necessary to oppose them militarily to protect the civilians whom they routinely blow up.

This slander on the WWSWS as anti-Muslim and neo-fascist is based only on hot air, and her division of opposition militias into four types, empty charlatantry. Progressive opposition to Assad comes from the Syrian working class. As for the Islamist opposition militias—be they Al Nusra and ISIS or so-called “moderates” like the Free Syrian Army or the Farouq Brigades—they are all “political Islamists who want to establish an Islamic state through violence.” By proposing “to oppose them militarily” in order to protect civilians, Hensman unintentionally endorses Assad’s war against them.

To be continued



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