

Australia's Socialist Alternative sends correspondent to Syria: The pseudo-left in alliance with al-Qaeda and the CIA

Oscar Grenfell
19 January 2025

Pseudo-left parties internationally have hailed last month's takeover of Syria by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group that emerged from the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. In doing so, these organisations have deepened their protracted alignment with imperialism.

What the pseudo-left has for years promoted as the "Syrian revolution" was in fact a massive regime change operation orchestrated by the US government and its allies, particularly Britain. In 2011, these major powers fomented a civil war in the country, using reactionary Islamist forces as their foot soldiers. The CIA is estimated to have funnelled a billion dollars in arms and cash to these forces, while vast resources were poured in from American imperialism's allies in the Gulf states.

Despite having collaborated with imperialism for many years, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad was viewed as a potential obstacle to untrammelled US dominance of the Middle East. The effort to remove Assad was bound up with hostility in Washington to Syria's close ties to both Iran and Russia.

This operation, having laid waste to Syria and resulted in the emergence of ISIS, came to fruition with the HTS takeover of the country last month. That is part of the broader imperialist war drive in the region, including the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians, its war against Lebanon and the US-led threats and military provocations targeting Iran. HTS has pledged to collaborate with the major powers as well as with Israel. A conga line of imperialist representatives have travelled to Syria, meeting with HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani, a longstanding al-Qaeda terrorist who has now been removed from a US government bounty list.

All of this has been covered up by the pseudo-left internationally, which has lauded the HTS takeover as the victory of a "revolution" and the dawn of a new era of Syrian democracy.

Socialist Alternative, an Australian pseudo-left group, has gone further than most. Last month, it dispatched one of its leading members, Omar Hassan, to Syria. Hassan, who appears to be the first representative of the international pseudo-left to openly enter Syria under the new regime, has written a series of dispatches for Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* publication.

Hassan's articles can only be described as a pro-imperialist whitewash. At times he makes criticisms of HTS because it is so openly reactionary, but these limited condemnations, serving as political cover for *Red Flag*, are all within the framework that the ouster of Assad is a victory for the Syrian people and a great advance.

In Hassan's eight dispatches, published between January 2 and 19, there are some glaring omissions.

The words "imperialism" and "imperialist" do not appear. There is not a single reference to the US or British governments, or their intelligence agencies, despite them having played such a decisive role in the civil war and immediately developing relations with the HTS regime.

Hassan also makes no reference to Turkey's role. That is an especially striking omission inasmuch as Turkey, a NATO member, has been the biggest backer of HTS in recent years. Even within the reactionary world of hardline Islamists, HTS has been condemned by some as a puppet of the Erdogan regime, which has subordinated the "jihad" to the foreign policy interests of Turkey. But, as with the role of the imperialist powers, Hassan avoids what is no doubt a sensitive point for HTS by simply ignoring it.

Hassan in raptures on entering "free Syria"

There is an even more glaring omission in the first two dispatches. Hassan does not mention HTS! The first dispatch is rapturously headlined "Entering free Syria," but neglects to mention that said "free Syria" is ruled by a hardline al-Qaeda regime which has stated that even restricted parliamentary elections will likely not take place for four years.

That dispatch sets the tone for the rest. It is written in the style of "the people seem happy" propaganda that has frequently been employed by corrupt writers on behalf of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes.

Whereas crossing the Lebanese border into Syria was once onerous, due to corruption and bribery, now people say that it is not. "When we reach the capital, New Year's celebrations are in full swing and masses of people are on the streets," "Spirits are high" and "the small number of armed guards seem relaxed" etc, etc.

Hassan writes: "[P]eople are revelling in Assad's defeat. Who could blame them? After 54 years of a dynastic dictatorship, the Syrian people are enjoying their first taste of freedom."

In the first dispatch, and all subsequent ones, Hassan makes no attempt to define this "freedom." Given that HTS has all but ruled out elections, it is not the nominal "freedom" of capitalist parliamentary rule. Nor is there any suggestion that more fundamental changes addressing social and economic inequality are in the offing. Hassan's "freedom" thus has about as much content and sincerity as that of any bourgeois hack who abuses the term, recalling nothing so much as the statements of war criminals like George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

How Hassan whitewashes al-Qaeda

By the third and fourth dispatches some dark clouds have emerged, with

Hassan having discovered HTS and some of its “reactionary” positions. He covered a small protest, opposing HTS’s changes to the school curriculum.

Hassan writes: “Everyone agrees that the pro-Assad propaganda that saturates the textbooks needs to be removed. But the proposed reforms go further...” They include “eliminating lessons on evolution and the Big Bang theory, abolishing all negative references to the Ottoman Empire” and denouncing Jews and Christians. The changes were introduced by a HTS decree, but Hassan makes no attempt to square this with his repeated references to “freedom.”

In another dispatch, Hassan is compelled to acknowledge “chilling” and “terrifying” reports of HTS forces carrying out sectarian pogroms across the country. Even here, Hassan downplays the implications.

The fact that HTS is murdering and rounding up civilians on the basis of their religion and ethnicity is “a stark reminder that the situation in Damascus, where stability reigns and the right to protest and gather peacefully is fairly unchallenged, is not the experience of all Syrians at this time.” The HTS reign of terror, Hassan notes, has provoked lively discussion on social media, but “at times, these debates can fall into sectarian patterns and discourses.”

This is not naive complacency on Hassan’s part. It is a politically criminal attempt to downplay the obvious threat that the imperialist-backed HTS regime poses to the most basic democratic rights of the Syrian people. For years, Socialist Alternative promoted the Islamist insurgency as a “revolution,” even as sectarian atrocities by HTS and other groups were widely-documented, foreshadowing what is now being perpetrated on a larger scale.

Having pointed to the reports of HTS atrocities, however, in a subsequent dispatch published January 13 Hassan recounted his friendly discussions with its fighters.

Beneath a headline hailing “heroes of the revolution” in the southwestern city of Daraa, Hassan writes: “In recent times, some of the FSA [Free Syrian Army] brigades in Daraa have begun affiliating to HTS. They were attracted by its superior funding and organisation, but also by what they saw as its success in governing Idlib province.” What did these “heroes” do? During its protracted control of Idlib, HTS established a despotic dictatorship, including widespread human rights abuses, torture and imprisonment.

Hassan then recounts the following exchange: “‘Things are great there, almost like Europe,’ claims an armed guard patrolling the streets. He moved to Idlib just a few months ago after his father was appointed to a leading position within HTS. They returned to Daraa triumphantly, part of HTS’s southward march through Hama, Homs and Damascus.” Hassan hastens to add that many FSA fighters in Daraa have not joined HTS, and approvingly cites one fighter predicting that the al-Qaeda organisation would be dissolved through a unification of all the armed Islamist groups.

Another dispatch promoted the activities of militia groups in the southwestern city of Suwayda. Hassan presented the militia, which are organised along sectarian lines among the Druze minority, as a model of regional “autonomy.” That position aligns with the major powers that are actively considering a further partition of Syria amid a scramble for influence and control over the geo-strategically critical country.

Even while celebrating the “autonomy” in Suwayda and the absence of a large HTS fighting force, Hassan declared: “There is, however, an HTS envoy, Mustafa al-Bakkour, who is in practice functioning as the area’s governor, which nobody seems to mind.”

Hassan in search of the Syrian “left”

Hassan, as is clear, had no difficulty in finding imperialist-sponsored Islamists and various sectarian militias, but for years, Socialist Alternative derided any suggestion that these constituted the main force of the “revolution” as an “Assadist” conspiracy theory. Without ever being able to outline political organisations, programs or leaders, they always hinted that there was a “progressive” element within the insurgency that pointed the way forward.

On the ground in Syria, this was Hassan’s chance to find such a movement. The results he came up with were desultory. A meeting of “the left,” in which Hassan participated in Damascus was attended by a grand total of 55 people in a city of 2.5 million. There were no young people, Hassan noted. Someone explained to him that was because the youth were “less politically engaged,” to which Hassan added, “Presumably, the winter holidays don’t help either.”

Socialist Alternative has hailed the fall of Assad as a victorious revolution, but has there ever been a genuine revolution in history that has not animated the younger generation, even slightly?

The “Syrian revolution” having come to fruition, almost 14 years after it began, one would imagine that the “left” would have a detailed and worked out plan for its further development. As per Hassan’s account, the 55 individuals gathered were essentially at the drawing board stage. They had recently formed something called the “Syrian Democratic Movement,” and the meeting established a “broad consensus” on such aims as “emphasising women’s rights” and “working towards involving more youth in the movement.”

“If there was something missing from the conversation, it was a focus on economic grievances,” Hassan lamented. In other words, the new movement had nothing to say about the social conditions of the working class, much less any program to advance its interests.

Another meeting Hassan attended was addressed virtually by Anne Alexander, a prominent representative of the British pseudo-left, whom Hassan described as a “Middle East expert.” In Hassan’s recounting, “Alexander stressed the need to build and strengthen independent unions that can use their power at the point of production to discipline bourgeois forces like HTS.”

That is, the consolidation of the HTS regime is a given and should be accepted. The task is to organise “independent unions” to somehow keep it in check and provide a counterbalance. That is a perspective that dovetails entirely with the interests of the British and American governments, which, while signalling that they will collaborate with the al-Qaeda regime, no doubt wish for some sort of democratic fig leaf, as well as potentially a bourgeois opposition that can be turned to if the Islamist group enters a crisis or gets out of line.

As with Alexander’s comments, Hassan’s travelogues paint him as operating like a typical western NGO representative, anxious for an expansion of “civil participation,” within the framework of capitalist rule and the existing geopolitical order. In addition to the word “imperialism,” the word “socialism” does not appear once. There is not a suggestion that he raised with anyone that the only way to secure the social and democratic rights of the Syrian masses was by building a socialist movement of the working class.

How has Hassan travelled so freely?

Syria, under al-Qaeda rule, is an unlikely destination for a “socialist” whose political work is largely concentrated in inner-city, bohemian Melbourne. The Australian government currently advises: “Do not travel to Syria due to the extremely dangerous security situation and the threat of armed conflict, air strikes, terrorism, arbitrary detention and kidnapping.”

One sincerely hopes that Hassan has considered these possibilities and that he makes it out of Syria unscathed. Extraordinary recklessness and light mindedness cannot be discounted in his choice to travel to Syria.

That would seem the less likely explanation. Under conditions where HTS is consolidating its rule, including through the murder of political rivals, Hassan has been able to travel freely throughout the country. His dispatches are being published more or less contemporaneously, under his real name, for which he has previously stood as a candidate for parliament.

Some may find it implausible that while walking the streets of Daraa, Hassan struck up a conversation with a random armed fighter, whose father turned out to be a leading member of HTS. In any event, Hassan is clearly receiving introductions, including to hardened Islamist fighters and leading members of Druze militia.

The question is inevitably posed: does Hassan have a security arrangement with HTS? If so, are there certain topics that are off limits, such as the group's close ties to the Turkish regime? Has his travel been facilitated or approved by any other regional states, or in consultation with western agencies?

The pseudo-left as an agency of imperialism

Whatever the answer to those questions, Hassan's trip has an unmistakably pro-imperialist character. It is part of an embrace of the new HTS regime by the major powers and its constituency in the upper middle-class, which was also expressed in a fawning meeting between Germany's Green Party foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, who has championed a "feminist foreign policy," and HTS leader al-Julani.

Baerbock has been an outspoken supporter of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, including by explicitly defending the bombing of schools and hospitals. Hassan and Socialist Alternative have denounced the genocide and been heavily involved in weekly pro-Palestinian protests in Australian cities.

But Israel receives scarcely a mention in Hassan's dispatches, and that under conditions where the Israel Defence Forces are conducting operations to seize Syrian territory and HTS has pledged a friendly attitude to the Zionist regime.

One dispatch recounts a visit by Hassan to Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. It was levelled during the civil war, including through heavy strikes by the Assad regime and the activities of ISIS and al-Nusra, HTS's al-Qaeda linked predecessor. That the Assads repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians and committed crimes during the war is not in doubt, but Hassan makes the following ludicrous statement which would warm the hearts of Zionists everywhere: "Indeed, Assad's thugs killed more Palestinians in Yarmouk than Israel did in any one of its wars prior to 7 October."

Throughout the dispatches, Hassan presents the Assad regime as unspeakably and incomparably evil. That has always been how the pseudo-left has justified its support for the regime-change operation. That the Assad government was reactionary and despotic is clear. That is the case with literally every regime in the Middle East.

Genuine socialists explain that the rotten role of the Arab regimes testifies to the bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development. They oppose such regimes from the left, fighting to build an independent socialist movement of the working class against them.

For Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left, the hysterical references to the Assad regime were merely cover to align with imperialism. Socialist Alternative was more explicit than most, with one of its leading members,

Corey Oakley, infamously declaring in 2012 that the Syrian civil war meant "the time for 'knee-jerk anti-imperialism' has now passed." The world "has changed," Oakley asserted, and "imperialism, in the sense of Western neo-colonialism, is not the main threat facing the masses of Syria, or of the Arab world as a whole."

Basing themselves on that line, Socialist Alternative hailed the advance of the reactionary, CIA-funded Islamists. To the extent that it acknowledged western backing for the "rebels," Socialist Alternative lined up with the most hawkish sections of the military-intelligence establishment, insisting that the support was insufficient and calling for greater weapons and funds to be transferred.

This was not simply a Syrian question. It marked the open entrance into the camp of imperialism by political forces that had broken from the Trotskyist movement decades before. Having rejected the revolutionary role of the working class in the post-World War II period, these forces became the political representatives of a layer of the middle-class that grew increasingly affluent in the 1980s and 1990s, at the same time that the social position of the working class was under attack. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and amid the emergence of mass social opposition, these forces moved further to the right, aligning with their own governments.

That process has only accelerated. Amid a breakdown of capitalism and an eruption of militarism globally, Socialist Alternative, for instance, is not only aligning with the US, Israel and the Australian government in supporting regime-change in Syria. It is also fully backing the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens nuclear war in Europe.

Hassan's trip is another demonstration that a genuine anti-war movement, which must be based on the working class and a socialist perspective directed against the source of conflict, capitalism, can only be built through a relentless political fight against the pseudo-left.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact