

The abandonment of the CIA's Syrian "rebels" and the pseudo-left accomplices of US imperialism

By Bill Van Auken
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A revealing article published in the *New York Times* provides a glimpse of the debate within the US state and its military-intelligence apparatus that led to last month's decision by the Trump administration to pull the plug on the CIA's regime-change operation in Syria.

The *Times* account paints the CIA's dirty war to oust Syria's President Bashar al-Assad through the arming, training and funding of Sunni sectarian militias linked to Al Qaeda as an unmitigated fiasco.

It reports that the US government spent "more than \$1 billion over the life of the program" to provide weapons and even pay the salaries of the so-called "rebels."

Codenamed Timber Sycamore, the CIA regime-change operation was formally launched in June of 2013. In reality, the agency had been active in Syria for years. In the wake of the US-NATO war's toppling of the Libyan government and the assassination of its leader Muammar Gaddafi, the CIA created a rat line to funnel both arms stockpiles and Islamist fighters into Syria to launch a vicious sectarian war.

The *Times* describes the CIA program as "one of the most expensive efforts to arm and train rebels since the agency's program arming the mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s."

It catalogues the ostensible disasters wrought by the CIA's barely covert intervention, including much of the CIA weapons funneled into Syria having "ended up in the hands of a rebel group tied to Al Qaeda," i.e., the al-Nusra Front.

"Once C.I.A.-trained fighters crossed into Syria, C.I.A. officers had difficulty controlling them," according to the *Times* article. "The fact that some of their C.I.A. weapons ended up with Nusra Front—and that some of the rebels joined the group—confirmed the fears of many in the Obama administration when the program began. Although the Nusra Front was widely seen as an effective fighting force against Mr. Assad's troops, its Qaeda affiliation made it impossible for the Obama administration to provide direct support for the group."

This was hardly a mere mishap, given that the Nusra Front, along with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), constituted the backbone of the armed anti-Assad forces, and the CIA's supposedly "vetted" and "moderate" rebels fought in close alliance with these Islamist militias. The *Times* chooses its words carefully when it notes that the Al Qaeda affiliation of the Nusra Front "made it impossible for the Obama administration to provide *direct* support for the group." Instead, the "vetted rebels" served as a conduit for arms that Washington knew would wind up with the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate and its spin-off, ISIS.

Citing US intelligence estimates, the *Times* reports that the Nusra Front "now has as many as 20,000 fighters in Syria, making it Al Qaeda's largest affiliate." This represents the principal achievement secured by the CIA with its \$1 billion program.

The article likewise notes that the White House "also received periodic reports that the CIA-trained rebels had summarily executed prisoners and committed other violations of the rules of armed conflict." This is a delicate way of describing the beheading of children, sectarian massacres, the parading members of religious minorities in cages, mass executions and the terrorizing of entire civilian populations.

The CIA-orchestrated war for regime change reached its high watermark in 2015, threatening Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Hama provinces in the north, as well as Homs in the center of the country and areas of Damascus and other provinces in the south. The result was a bloodbath that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees.

In response Russia offered military assistance to the Syrian government, providing air cover for a counteroffensive that ultimately drove the Islamist fighters back and wrested from them their last significant urban foothold in eastern Aleppo in December of last year. The victory of the government forces was a result not merely of Russian firepower, but more decisively the hostility toward the reactionary Islamist "rebels" of broad layers of the population that came to see the Assad regime, its repression and corruption notwithstanding, as the lesser evil.

The *Times* article makes clear that Trump's decision to end the CIA program in Syria, taken on the recommendations of his CIA director Mike Pompeo as well as senior military officials, was the end result of a protracted and bitter debate within the White House and the US military-intelligence apparatus that began under the Obama administration.

Opponents of the program within the US state condemned the operation as "foolhardy, expensive and ineffective," the *Times* reports, while its supporters "say that it was unnecessarily cautious, and that its achievements were remarkable given that the Obama administration had so many restrictions on it from the start, which they say ultimately ensured its failure."

Among these supporters, according to the *Times*, was John Brennan, Obama's last CIA director, who "remained a vigorous defender of the program despite divisions within the spy agency about the effort's effectiveness." Also pushing the CIA program were foreign backers, including Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose

government has long sought Syria's dismemberment.

The *Times* article serves to shed considerable light on the political activities of a group of organizations and publications presenting themselves as socialists and leftists which promoted the CIA regime-change operation as a "Syrian revolution" that deserved unqualified support.

Prominent among these layers have been *International Viewpoint*, the publication of the Pabloite United Secretariat, and its principal spokesman on the Middle East, Gilbert Achcar, a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. Also a leading propagandist for the CIA's "Syrian revolution" has been the International Socialist Organization and its chief spokesman on Syrian developments, Ashley Smith.

These figures and others, such as the Left Party in Germany and the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, waged an international campaign to drum up support for the imperialist-orchestrated war to oust the Assad government, appealing in the name of "human rights" to a middle-class milieu of liberals and ex-lefts.

They resolutely supported the right of the Syrian "revolutionaries"—Islamists on the CIA payroll—to receive arms, training and funds from the US intelligence agency and even to appeal for direct US imperialist intervention in Syria.

Achcar pioneered this approach by stridently supporting the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, insisting that "anti-imperialist principles" had to take a back seat to "humanitarian" concerns for the Libyan people. Achcar and his allies provided a pseudo-left justification for a war that claimed the lives of over 30,000 Libyans and has left the country, nearly six years later, in state of utter chaos and devastation.

In relation to Syria, *International Viewpoint* and the ISO—Achcar and Smith—lambasted the Obama administration for failing to provide sufficient support for the "Syrian revolution." They insisted after Russia began providing air support to the forces of the Assad government that the CIA arm the "rebels" with anti-aircraft missiles.

Aside from concerns that placing such weapons in the hands of the CIA-backed forces could trigger a military confrontation between the US and Russia, the world's two major nuclear powers, elements in the US state apparatus also justifiably feared that they would end up in the hands of Al Qaeda and could, sooner rather than later, be turned against the US itself.

Thus, last September, Smith wrote angrily in the ISO's *Socialist Worker* that the Obama administration "preferred to cut deals with Russia rather than take any action that might topple Assad" and had "refused to supply the FSA [Free Syrian Army, the fictitious label applied to the collection of Islamist militias] with weapons it pleaded for to defend itself against regime air strikes."

In the final analysis, these positions represented political support for the faction within the US state apparatus—led by the likes of Brennan, the career CIA official implicated in countless crimes from torture, to drone assassinations to the mass killings in the Middle East—that was demanding an escalation of the regime-change operation.

This support was not merely platonic. Achcar, who is cited as an ally and an authority by elements like the ISO and *Jacobin* magazine, lent his expertise to the collection of US and French intelligence assets that comprised the Syrian National Council, counseling them on the most effective way to lobby for Western military intervention.

These pseudo-left figures and organizations function as what amount to specialized NGOs, acting, much like the National Endowment for Democracy and its constituent elements, as political

fronts and facilitators for the CIA and US imperialism.

Their politics reflect the social interests of privileged layers of the upper-middle class, whose wealth and privileges are bound up with the processes of financial parasitism that have driven up stock prices and real estate values. The pseudo-left has worked to recruit this social strata as a new constituency for imperialism based on phony "human rights" appeals.

While the Trump administration has wound up the already failed CIA regime-change operation in Syria, US imperialism has by no means ended its intervention. On the contrary, the Pentagon has deployed US troops on the ground and has armed, funded and trained other proxy forces, including the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, dominated by the Kurdish YPG militia, in the north, as well as Sunni elements in the south. The US military has made it clear that it intends to establish permanent bases in the country and carve out its own sphere of influence as part of the broader struggle to militarily assert US hegemony over the Middle East.

The escalation of the US military intervention, which found expression last April with the firing of 59 cruise missiles on a Syrian air base, has only elicited demands from the pseudo-lefts for more.

Responding to the US attack for the ISO, Ashley Smith lamented that "The U.S. only attacked the one base and didn't even blow up its runway."

He went on to note Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's statement that Washington was no longer seeking Assad's ouster, declaring, "The U.S. thus proved itself no ally of the Syrian Revolution. It has turned a blind eye while Russia, Iran and Hezbollah intervened in support of Assad's counterrevolutionary war to save his dictatorship."

Rather than a "blind eye," clearly the ISO wants a more aggressive US military response, a position that, once again, reflects the attitude of substantial layers of the US political establishment and its military and intelligence apparatus.

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