

The ISO and the imperialist politics of the pseudo-left

By Barry Grey
16 May 2018

The International Socialist Organization is stepping up its efforts to legitimize American imperialism's military interventions in the Middle East in the wake of US-British-French missile strikes against Syria, the intensified offensive against Iran signaled by President Donald Trump's pullout from the Iran nuclear agreement, and the Israeli bombardment of Iranian forces in Syria.

The ISO's longstanding campaign for an escalation of the US-led war for regime change in Syria and a more direct confrontation with Iranian and Russian forces has closely tracked the moves by the American government. The present situation is no exception.

In recent days, *Socialist Worker*, the website of the ISO, has prominently featured an editorial published May 8 titled "Our socialism is international," which concludes with an attack on opponents of the US intervention and Washington's proxy forces in Syria, branding them apologists for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The ISO has also reposted an article by Ashley Smith from August of 2016, at the height of the media propaganda blitz denouncing the Syrian government offensive against US-backed "rebels" in Aleppo, which makes similar arguments (see: "International Socialist Organization backs NATO escalation in Syria")

On May 1, *Socialist Worker* published a commentary titled "The left can't be silent about Assad's crimes." The article attacked a piece published in *Jacobin* under the headline "US Out of Syria." *Jacobin* has adopted an eclectic position on the war, publishing articles both pro and con.

The ISO felt all the more obliged to publicly reply to this article because *Jacobin* is co-hosting the ISO's "Socialism 2018" conference in Chicago in July. *Jacobin's* publisher, Bhaskar Sunkara, is a former vice-chairman of the Democratic Socialists of America, with which the ISO appears to be preparing some form of political regroupment.

The ISO is concerned that politically radicalized students and youth attracted to socialism are hostile to American military interventions in Syria and elsewhere. The growth of anti-capitalist sentiment among young people coincides with a resurgence of the class struggle among teachers and other sections of workers, which is taking the form of an incipient rebellion against the corporatist trade unions.

The ISO wants to ensure that any movement that emerges is subordinated to the agencies of American imperialism such as the unions, the Democratic Party and the State Department.

Its May 1 article begins by complaining that the *Jacobin* article "provides an analysis of the US government role in Syria that is at best misleading and at worst a compilation of dangerous conspiracy theories." The authors criticize the *Jacobin* article for "casting doubt on the idea that the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons... With his arguments, Shupak [the author of the *Jacobin* article] joins a section of the left that apologizes for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and the Russian and Iranian interventions that have propped him up. By taking this position, they ally themselves with forces that have worked to crush

the Syrian revolution and the broader Arab Spring."

In other words, anything short of uncritical acceptance of US government claims about alleged crimes by the Syrian government is tantamount to political support for Assad.

This is a cynical and dishonest amalgam. The ISO is using a form of moral blackmail to stampede youth and workers appalled by the death and destruction inflicted by the US in Syria into supporting the American intervention. "When the Syrian uprising began," the authors write, "leftists had to make a choice—support a popular uprising or a murderous dictator. *Sections of the left reverted to old paradigms about US imperialism in the Middle East that were always incomplete and that certainly today no longer fit the context of the region.*" [Emphasis added]

Later on, they return to this theme, writing: "The question is simple. Which side are you on? Assad or the Syrian people resisting his oppressive regime?"

This presentation of the situation in Syria and the broader Middle East is a travesty of history and socialist principles. It completely accepts the fraudulent "human rights" framework that US imperialism has used for decades as the pretext to invade countries, overthrow governments and plunder entire regions in the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

What are these "old paradigms about US imperialism in the Middle East" that no longer apply? The ISO is arguing that the long-established hostility of the left to American imperialism is outdated, that the American State Department, Pentagon and CIA can play a progressive and democratic role, and that "leftists" should support their global campaigns against Syria, Iran and Russia.

Has the role of American imperialism changed?

The ISO would have people believe that the war in Syria represents a new and unprecedented phenomenon. According to it, "some on the left" have "mistakenly viewed the US as the main aggressor in Syria," when in fact the US is "not pursuing regime change" and has essentially ceded the initiative in the region to Russia and Iran. According to the ISO, these latter states are the principal actors, with the US consigned to the role of a second-rank player with no significant influence.

The narrative is absurd from beginning to end. In fact, the United States has a long history of disguising its aggressive military interventions behind talk of defending democracy and human rights and supporting local "insurgencies" for this purpose.

The US launched the Korean War, which killed 5 million people, in an effort to strangle the Chinese Revolution, which had triumphed the year before. It was supposedly waged to defend "freedom" against "communist totalitarianism."

Washington carried out the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, using a mercenary force recruited by the CIA, in the name of "democracy."

In Vietnam, the United States killed nearly 3.5 million Vietnamese for the supposed purpose of defending the "Free World" against communist

dictatorship.

Nor is the use of right-wing Islamist militias, for the most part linked to Al Qaeda, as US proxy forces peculiar to Washington's intervention in Syria. The CIA armed and funded the Mujahideen (whom Reagan called the moral equals of America's founding fathers) to overthrow a pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan in the 1980s, giving rise to Al Qaeda, and it resorted to Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces to bring down and murder Gaddafi in Libya.

There is no essential difference between these criminal interventions and the US war to overthrow Assad and establish a puppet regime in Syria.

Among the socialist principles jettisoned by the ISO is the distinction drawn by Marxists between oppressor nations and oppressed nations. Syria is an oppressed nation, a former colony of France that has long been subject to subversion and intrigue by the United States. From the days of Marx through Lenin and Trotsky to the present, genuine socialists have not based their attitude to military attacks by imperialist powers on oppressed nations on the democratic credentials of the governments of the targeted countries.

The Assad government, as the Iranian government and all of the governments in the Middle East, is a bourgeois regime. It has run afoul of the United States not because it is repressive. Washington has no problem allying itself with and arming the Saudi oil sheiks and the bloody al-Sisi military dictatorship in Egypt. Assad has been targeted for regime change because he is allied with Russia and Iran, and is therefore seen by the United States as an obstacle to its drive for hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and the Eurasian continent that it borders.

It is the task of the Syrian working class to put an end to the rule of Assad by the methods of class struggle and international socialist revolution, in opposition to both imperialism and the local ruling class, not in alliance with imperialism. Marxists do not contract out the struggle against the bourgeoisie anywhere to one or another imperialist power, all of which operate to subjugate, exploit and plunder other countries as well as their "own" working class.

The ISO attacks the Marxist conception of imperialism. For Marxists, the term has an objective historical significance. We continue to live in the epoch of imperialism.

Lenin defined imperialism as a definite stage in the historical development of capitalism—the highest stage. It was and remains the epoch of wars and revolutions. Its essential features are the monopolization of the economy, the dominance of finance capital, and the carve-up of the entire planet by a handful of advanced countries. It signifies, in Lenin's words, "reaction all down the line."

On these scientific foundations, not moralistic phrases, Marxists determine their attitude to a given war. The central issues are the class interests being pursued by the various camps, whether the countries involved are oppressor nations or oppressed nations, and what the real war aims are. These questions can be answered only by an examination of the historical background and the international context in which the war has erupted.

The ISO says nothing about the historical context of the war being waged by the US and its NATO and regional allies in Syria. In fact, the United States has been engaged in perpetual war for more than a quarter-century, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Each of these wars has been justified on the basis of lies, most notoriously the fabrication of "weapons of mass destruction" used as the pretext for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In all these aggressive wars, the US has employed the propaganda technique of demonizing the leaders of the targeted countries—generally figures who had previously collaborated with Washington in its predatory global activities.

The list includes Manuel Noriega of Panama (invaded in 1989), Saddam Hussein of Iraq (1991 and 2003), Mohamed Farrah Aidid of Somalia

(1992), Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia (1999), the Taliban of Afghanistan (2001), Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (2011) and now Bashar al-Assad of Syria. Most of these leaders have ended up imprisoned, dead or both, and there is no doubt that Assad remains in the cross hairs of the US military today.

Moreover, the US has been intervening in Syria ever since France granted the country nominal independence in 1946, beginning with the CIA-orchestrated ouster of the left bourgeois nationalist regime of Shukri al-Quwatly in March of 1949. In December of the same year, Adib Shishakli came to power in a coup organized with the support of the US. Indicative of the political types leading the anti-Assad opposition today is the fact that Adib Shishakli's grandson and namesake, Adib Shishakli, a right-wing businessman with close ties to the Saudi royal family, is a leading figure in that opposition.

The US has been working to destabilize and ultimately remove the Assad regime for more than 15 years. Despite Syria's collaboration with the US in the early days of the "war on terror," Trump's current national security adviser, John Bolton, then an undersecretary of state in the George W. Bush administration, gave a speech in 2002, "Beyond the Axis of Evil," in which he added three other countries—Syria, Libya and Cuba—to Bush's list of Iraq, Iran and North Korea as countries most directly targeted by American imperialism.

Washington enacted the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, which imposed sanctions against the Assad regime. Following the 2005 assassination of the pro-US business tycoon and former prime minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri, which Washington immediately blamed on Assad, the US stepped up its offensive against Syria, forcing the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

According to cables published by WikiLeaks, the US State Department provided \$6 million to an Islamic group, the Movement for Justice and Development. This funded the anti-Assad Barada TV and various subversive activities in Syria. The US also funneled \$12 million into its Middle East Partnership Initiative between 2005 and 2010.

In 2011, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published details of another US-inspired plot against Syria. It reported that in 2008, the Saudi national security adviser and long-time ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and Jeffrey Feltman, a veteran US diplomat in the Middle East and assistant secretary of state for Middle East affairs, had hatched a \$2 billion plot to destabilize Syria and overthrow the Assad regime.

By the time protests broke out against the Assad regime in March of 2011, the US had in place a far-flung and well-financed infrastructure of CIA assets and émigré politicians to rapidly gain control and channel the opposition behind the intrigues of US imperialism and its regional allies Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf oil sheikdoms.

Syria's CIA-backed "democratic revolution"

Central to the ISO's libel against opposition to the US intervention in Syria is the claim that the civil war in the country is a "democratic revolution." According to its fraudulent narrative, the US is not backing Islamist militias and the anti-Assad movement is a "genuine expression of popular outrage."

The May 1 article is particularly incensed by the (correct) statement in *Jacobin* that "The CIA's effort to oust the Syrian government has been one of the costliest covert-action programs in the agency's history." The ISO rejects this statement, though it makes no effort to refute the facts cited to back it up, including an article in the *New York Times* noting that the CIA has spent \$1 billion on its operations in Syria.

The ISO attempts to deny what is in fact undeniable—that the main forces arrayed against the Syrian government in Syria are Islamist militias, the most active of which are linked to Al Qaeda. The partisans of this "revolution" vie with one another for money and arms from regional

and imperialist powers, mainly the US. They include forces funneled into Syria from Libya, Russia, Turkey and other countries by the CIA and allied Western intelligence agencies.

This so-called revolution has not produced a single programmatic document and has no internationally recognized spokespeople. The ISO never seeks to define the class character of its “revolution.”

The ISO does not choose to name the political leaders of its “revolution” because they are, virtually without exception, tied to the US government and the governments of the other imperialist powers. The Syrian National Council, which was formed in the summer of 2011 and immediately presented by the American media as the legitimate leadership of the anti-Assad opposition, was politically dominated by the Saudi- and Qatari-backed Muslim Brotherhood and led by émigré businessmen, lawyers and politicians with long ties to the US State Department, the CIA and the intelligence agencies of the European imperialist powers. Its initial head was a wealthy Chicago-based lawyer.

Agitating for a war it falsely claims to oppose

The ISO presents a grossly distorted account of the events in Syria so as to whitewash Washington’s responsibility for the destruction of an entire society, including the killing and maiming of hundreds of thousands of people and transformation of millions more into homeless refugees. It seeks to legitimize the official US lie that the blame for this bloody catastrophe rests entirely with Assad and his “imperialist” allies Russia and Iran. It slanders opponents of the US war as apologists for Assad and denounces the US government for failing to supply more advanced weapons to the Islamist militias that comprise the “rebels.”

Yet at the same time, talking out of both sides of its mouth, it claims to oppose the US intervention in the country. The authors of the May 1 *Socialist Worker* article write: “As revolutionary socialists, we recognize that US military intervention anywhere is against the interests of all working people. We agree that US intervention in Syria and elsewhere should be opposed unequivocally.”

This is a brazen lie. Far from opposing US military intervention, the ISO has for years been campaigning for it to be expanded. The May 1 *Socialist Worker* article restates the ISO’s oft repeated attack on both the Obama and Trump administrations for failing to supply the so-called “rebels” with sufficient arms, denouncing the government for “denying them anti-aircraft weaponry that would be necessary to combat the regime’s air war.”

Just weeks before the April 14 missile strikes against Syria, Eric Ruder, a prominent member of the ISO and socialistworker.org writer, signed an open letter published in the *New York Review of Books* by some 200 “left” academics, writers and journalists under the headline “The World Must Act Now on Syria.”

Issued in the midst of a coordinated propaganda campaign in the Western media over the Russian and Syrian government assault on anti-Assad Islamist holdouts in the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta, the letter was an open appeal to the US and the other imperialist powers to launch a direct military intervention against the regime (see: “A new ‘left’ appeal for imperialist intervention in Syria”). Less than seven weeks later, the US, Britain and France used the pretext of the alleged gas attack Douma in eastern Ghouta to launch their missile attack on Syrian facilities.

In September of 2013, after the Obama administration pulled back from plans to bomb Syria, having blamed the Assad government for an alleged sarin gas attack in eastern Ghouta without producing any proof of its involvement in the event, the ISO issued an apoplectic denunciation of Washington’s failure to implement its war plans. *Socialist Worker* published a rant by Michael Karadjis of the Socialist Alliance in Australia. It said, in part:

“Terrified of popular revolution, throughout these two-and-a-half years,

the US and especially Israel have happily watched the slaughter, and despite hypocritical whining about the regime, the US has made sure to *not send a single gun or bullet* to the armed opposition up to now... [A]verage Syrians would gladly see a US attack if the US destroyed the ‘conventional’ weapons of mass destruction that Assad has used against them for the last two-and-a-half years... In fact, the idea that the US had ever wanted to intervene at all, including in this current crisis, is, in my opinion, also largely a grand delusion of Western left thinking.”

After the US missile attack on Syrian air bases in April of 2017, the ISO published an article by Joseph Daher and Frieda Afary denouncing the attack for not going far enough. They wrote:

“However, at this point, we can say that this strike, which was announced in advance to the Russian government, does not indicate any strategic change in US policy concerning the future of Syria or the Assad regime... Clearly, no peaceful and just solution in Syria can be reached with Bashar al-Assad and his clique in power. He is the biggest criminal in Syria and must be prosecuted for his crimes instead of being legitimized by international and regional imperialist powers.”

The upcoming “Socialism 2018” conference will take place in the context of a deepening global geopolitical, economic and social crisis; a widening war in the Middle East and a growing danger of world war; and an unprecedented political crisis in the United States, the center of world imperialism. This crisis is being immensely intensified by the revival of the class struggle internationally and in the United States.

The bourgeoisie is terrified of the implications of a new period of working-class struggle, under conditions where their main instruments for suppressing the class struggle in the US, the trade unions and the Democratic Party, are losing any credibility in the eyes of working people and youth.

The ISO, notwithstanding its socialist pretensions and rhetoric, is a critical part of the bourgeois political establishment in America. Its function is to provide a left face for sections of the foreign policy establishment, primarily those affiliated with the Democratic Party. Above all, it functions as a mechanism for the AFL-CIO, the Democratic Party and the State Department to seek to control oppositional movements in the US.

Those who attend the ISO conference in July should be aware of the organization’s pro-war record and oppose attempts to direct growing left-wing sentiment behind American imperialism.

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