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We Should Know Where We Stand

On Syria and Imperialism

First of May Anarchist Alliance

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Retrieved on 25th February 2021 from m1aa.org

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As anti-imperialists, we must also continue to understand issues at the intersection. The intersections of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious identity still matter to people in their everyday lives, whether oppressions can be clearly traced to empire or locally. Our solidarity to marginalized peoples must not be limited by supposedly leftist states or grand geopolitical narratives. The oppressed have the right to demand dignity from whoever is denying it to them, and we have a duty to support them as comrades.

The tendency for activists to reify people in the struggle makes it all the more clear that the most important thing we must do is build international connections for communication and tangible support. In the west, anti-imperialism cannot remain within the confines of heated social media arguments and Stalin memes; situations become abstract, arguments become a means to social capital. People become mere things or plot devices. It is imperative and urgent to organize and act in solidarity with our comrades under the gun in Syria and around the world. As revolutionaries and internationalists, we have a duty to make our solidarity concrete. How can the housing justice movement in Detroit relate to mass evictions in China? How can those within the US prison abolitionist movement connect with those who live in the open air prison of Gaza? How can striking Iranian and American teachers work together in common cause²⁴? How can our presence in the core of empire help stop US wars of aggression? *These are the questions we need to ask and the connections we need to make, in conversation with our international comrades.*

²⁴ www.allianceofmesocialists.org

torical machine who just need to play their proper and useful role in the grand narratives of imperialism and geopolitics.

Towards internationalism

So what are some ways we can illustrate international solidarity to our comrades in Syria and elsewhere? What would a truly anti-imperialist internationalism look like today? In reality, the answers are not neatly laid out; as with all organizing efforts, we have to learn as we go along, while absorbing critiques and lessons from the past. However, the minimum basis I would suggest we go by is that internationalists and anti-imperialists should support all struggles for social justice, radical democracy and self determination worldwide. This means a blanket rejection of all imperialist interventions, whether they be by the US or the other imperial powers. This also means a rejection of neoliberal globalization and support for struggles against austerity and poverty.

We must also recognize that the state operates primarily in the interests of the ruling classes, whether imperial monopoly capitalists or national capitalists or both — and states in general are institutions of order and capture, whose interest is to either destroy social movements or channel social movements toward its own ends. A state is not a movement, even when a state supports or is supported by movements, and that distinction must be clear when thinking about national liberation struggles. As anarchists, we should oppose all states but also recognize the movements they are attempting to capture as legitimate and support them as far as they demand social justice and self determination. Hence, we must offer critical support to national liberation struggles against empire, and also recognize when the facade of national liberation and anti-imperialism is being used solely to serve imperial, capitalist and state interests — as in the case of Assad.

The tendency to reduce conflicts and revolutions to the maneuvers of states or all causation to solely economic considerations are horrible characteristics of the Marxist-Leninist analysis of imperialism and something we must resist in a truly humanistic discourse about anti-imperialism and revolution.

A Revolution Against Neoliberalism

When Bashar Al-Assad came to power in Syria in the year 2000, any illusion that the dynastic authoritarian Baathist regime was “socialist” in any way should have been dispelled, if it already hadn’t when Hafez Al-Assad took power in a counter-revolutionary coup in the 1970’s. The younger Assad vigorously began liberalizing Syrian markets — notably food and agriculture — and opening Syria up to foreign capital. Over the next eleven years, coupled with the effects of climate change caused by global capitalism, Assad’s neoliberal program produced devastating results: agricultural employment was cut in half, the cost of goods rose significantly, public services were cut, per capita income fell drastically and poverty grew rampant. As urban centers struggled to absorb the massive rural exodus, small and medium sized rural towns were decimated and the class basis of the Syrian Revolution was developed.¹²

If neoliberalism and decades of violent repression were the fuel to the Syrian Revolution, the spark was the Arab Spring. The wave of pro-democratic and anti-austerity revolutionary uprisings that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the region (indiscriminately hitting countries both aligned with

¹ www.synaps.network

² syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com

and opposed to the US) captured the imaginations of Syrian workers and students, and in 2011 the Syrian people began taking the streets in protest of the Assad regime. The Assad regime met the peaceful protesters' demands with bullets and diversions, similar to how other regimes in middle east responded to people resisting austerity, authoritarianism and state violence. As Assad's bullets rained down on his opposition, protests turned to revolution; informal spontaneous uprisings turned to revolutionary organization. Influenced by the work of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, over a hundred local revolutionary committees councils of different federations were organized throughout Syria, beginning in Damascus and proliferating outward.³

As young people filled the streets demanding an end to neoliberal and authoritarian rule, the Baathist state began to lose its decades-long hold on the country. The resulting instability became an invitation for imperial powers to intervene, and an opportunity for reactionary currents to develop. As Assad released Jihadis from Syrian prisons⁴ and executed leftist revolutionaries⁵, the US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other regional powers surrounding Syria began their attempts to develop proxies and strategies to take advantage of the instability. The US and other western powers offered limited assistance to some of the Syrian opposition early on in the conflict, in the interests of protecting their hegemony in the region — but soon focused all of their resources on “fighting terror.” Russia and Iran intervened militarily at the behest of the collapsing Assad regime under the pretense of “fighting terror” and countering US maneuvers. As the revolution offered an opening for the Kurdish struggle for self determination, the Turkish state intensified

³ tahriricn.wordpress.com

⁴ syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com

⁵ isreview.org

And so, when they say “historically progressive”, we should ask “to who?” — Was the Assad regime “historically progressive” to innocent Muslim detainees in the CIA black sites it hosted in the years after 9/11?²² Is it “historically progressive” to families of those that were killed when it laid siege to Aleppo? The exercise of universalizing a standard of historical progress is a problematic exercise that doesn't sit well with supporting self determination — and has amounted to supporting capitalist development, extractive industries, the marginalization of those at the fringes of society, as well as imperialism. Is this the revolution the authoritarian left supports?

We believe that the Syrian people, like all people, are capable of social revolution; the orientalist defeatism that portrays the world outside of the west as a monolithic mass of backwards people who need to settle for what they have needs to be rejected. The erasure of people of color who have dreams of living beyond neoliberal destitution needs to be rejected. The ever presence of imperialist maneuvers and reactionary elements does not automatically discount all opposition to “historically progressive” regimes as imperialist or reactionary; this is the modern world, and empire and reaction are everywhere. Likely, the western left's utter distrust of Syrian revolutionaries comes from a deeply seated arrogance and bigotry; why they couldn't trust that the Syrian revolutionaries, who have lived with reactionary jihadism and imperialism in their own communities for years, knew best how to deal with these elements illustrates a sort of orientalist paternalism.²³ It is legitimate to critique — that is how we all move forward — but it is something else entirely to distrust and discredit. This paternalism speaks to the notion that the Syrian people are reified in the eyes of some of the western left; they are no longer humans, but cogs in a his-

²² www.wired.com

²³ socialistworker.org @ 42:17

using terrorism as a convenient scapegoat and justification for violence in the same exact way the west has always done. And the sheer amount of innocent civilians he has killed in doing so has been staggering.²¹

Eurocentrism and Anti-Humanist Discourse

The eurocentrism of Marxist-Leninist Assad supporters is a double sided coin. Devoid of a theoretical system that more clearly allows for ethics, creativity, and in general, the production of the new, they rely almost solely on a reductive and eurocentric historical calculation. Historical materialism has an important place in social and revolutionary theory, but it is constrained by eurocentric standards of development and statecraft; real decolonial self determination is elusive in this framework so long as what is “historically progressive” is defined by eurocentric criteria. At the same time, brown bodies are reified in the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary trajectory, with Third Worldists and others measuring the success of Marxism by how many brown bodies are engaged in its perpetuation. This contradiction essentially attempts to erase the agency of brown folks in the region, with every act of organic resistance to a supposedly “historically progressive” (nominally anti-US) tokenized regime transformed into a CIA conspiracy plot. The dreams and aspirations of Syrians living within the poverty of neoliberalism matter less than Syria’s position in the faulty monopoly capital schema, or the supposed “secular” credentials of its sectarian state. In fact, Syrians aren’t even allowed to dream about a better life; it would be ahistorical. The regime’s existence is justified as revolutionary already, and any resistance must be discredited as counter-revolutionary, regardless of purpose.

²¹ www.reuters.com

its campaign of violence to counter the Kurdish advancement⁶. Within this multifaceted, multidimensional conflict, a common theme has emerged among the interests of intervening imperial actors: the priority is to “fight terror”. This unifying theme does not actually make the situation easier to understand, but exposes layers of contradiction and complexity in how each actor in this conflict relates to each other. Assad and gulf powers have aided the rise of ISIS and other jihadi groups in Syria⁷⁸ for opposing reasons: For Assad it was in order have a scapegoat to discredit the revolution; for the gulf states, it was to gain a foothold in Syria. The US arming Kurds (who they used to call terrorists) to fight ISIS put the US at odds with its ally Turkey. The Kurds conflict with Turkey and ISIS put them in a position of collaboration with the Assad government. The US, who openly calls for the end to Assad’s rule, declares a red line on chemical weapons while performing thousands of airstrikes against Assad’s enemies — and, for purposes of optics, a couple of airstrikes against half-empty regime targets, after agreeing with Russia on what are acceptable targets and giving advanced warning⁹¹⁰. The complexities of how the conflict reproduces itself everyday, with all of its contradictions, are overwhelming. However, clearly, implicit within this decision to prioritize “fighting terror” is solid consensus around supporting the Assad regime, even if this position is not explicitly articulated. Although there is no convenient soundbite that could sum up conflict, this is an important point and basis for discussion.

⁶ Since this piece was intended to be about how we should orient toward the Syrian Revolution, I opted to narrow my focus and not go in depth about the Kurdish struggle. Much has been written on Rojava by anarchists; not as much has been written in solidarity with the Syrian revolution writ large.

⁷ news.sky.com

⁸ www.thedailybeast.com

⁹ www.independent.co.uk

¹⁰ www.newsweek.com

Later on in this piece, I want to put the geopolitical discussion in its proper place given other considerations: the tendency to reduce conflicts and revolutions to the maneuvers of states is horribly reductive, as is reducing all causation to solely economic considerations — both tendencies are characteristic of (a variety of) Marxist-Leninist analysis of imperialism and something we must resist in a truly humanistic discourse about anti-imperialism and revolution. However, first I want to critique the framework espoused by many Marxist-Leninists vis a vis imperialism and Syria, to point out its theoretical limitations. Although geopolitical and political economic considerations are not solely determinative, they are important and deserve some interrogation.

Monopoly and Myths of Capitalist Multipolarity

The complexity of imperial presence in Syria caught the western left off guard; it was a moment of realization for many that the unipolar world that rose in the wake of the collapse of the USSR was being challenged, if not on its way out. I would argue that the world is still unipolar in several ways, but the order is indeed experiencing challenges. The post-World War II policy of uniting inter-capitalist rivals around the globe has become untenable, as the emergence of China, Russia and other emerging markets have altered the geopolitical field. The US, China, Russia, Iran, and indeed, Syria, are all empires differing size and scope — but not in form. As these countries integrate further into the global capitalist order, their tendencies toward expansion and further exploitation become more powerful. The imperial state in capitalism plays the role of facilitating conquest as well security guard (protecting investments and interests related to them). Capitalism is

tween capitalist powers. One could make the claim that these are relationships of dependency on the western imperial core — my interest is not to cast judgements on a situation of imperial dependency. However, when the marginalized classes who have been impoverished by these measures rise up in revolution against them, where we stand should not be a matter of hesitation. When elites like Assad and his family benefit from this impoverishment, we should know where we stand. The Assad regime and its backers did not crush the revolution to beat back western capitalism — in many ways, they did so to preserve it.

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the biggest area of mutual interest between rival capitalist powers in Syria and worldwide is in the islamophobic “War on Terror”. From the US to Russia to China, the entirety of the global ruling class has been collaborating in the campaign to exterminate Muslims for years. The Jihadi has become the archetypal enemy of order and stability for the capitalist system, and no amount of civilian deaths is considered too excessive in the imperialists’ hunt for them. Whilst the western left vigorously raised objections to a couple of airstrikes against half-empty Assad targets in 2017 and 2018, not much has been said about 273 Syrian civilians killed by US coalition forces in May 2017 in the “fight against terror”²⁰, or the thousands of other US strikes in Syria. The silence of western leftists when the US imperialists kill civilians while hunting Assad’s enemies helps us understand the totalizing nature of western cultural hegemony and Orientalism: some things have become settled issues and thus no longer within the realm of politics — that innocent Muslim deaths are a necessary byproduct of the “War on Terror” has become so ingrained that it is no longer even worth talking about for many leftists in the west and beyond. If we were to talk about it, the intellectual bankruptcy of supporting Assad would be exposed, as Assad is

²⁰ sn4hr.org

Globalization, Inter-Imperialism and Islamophobia

Although the era of truce between capitalist powers looks like it is falling apart in many ways, there are significant relationships and connections of mutual interest that tie capitalist rivals together. These relationships are engendered by the global capitalist system, which the US sits at the top of, and which poses hard constraints on the prospect of self-determination. In a world where absolute advantage is defined by degree of labor exploitation and resource extraction, integration into the world capitalist economy and the adoption of the western commodity form pose new questions and challenges for anti-imperialism. The authoritarian leftist case for defining capitalist powers like Russia, Iran, and Syria as anti-imperialist is inadequate given the criticisms of the monopoly capitalism framework, but also it ignores the implications of neoliberal globalization. Rather than understanding the adoption of the western commodity form as its own form of western imperialism — a result of west's world hegemony, serving western capitalist interests — many on the left wish to protect neoliberal elites in supposedly anti-imperialist countries who are instituting this adoption. Putin, Assad, Khamenei are not insignificant agents in the proliferation of global neoliberalism; and their supposed resistance has always been contradicted by their participation in global capital. Assad's neoliberal reforms sparked the revolution against him, and it was Putin and Khamenei that came to the aid of neoliberalism in Syria.

When we look at the fact that Russia and China are heavily invested in the US and thus have an interest in US growth^{18,19}, or that the younger Assad opened up Syrian markets to the west, we see that there are large areas of mutual interest be-

historically not the only driver of imperialism, but imperialism has been integral to capitalism since its inception.¹¹

The idea that imperial expansionism is inherent to capitalism is an important theoretical point, and it's not one that is lost on Marxist-Leninists. However, there is perhaps a strategy of avoidance when it comes to this fact. A contradiction within Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism and Monopoly Capitalism is that successful capitalist "self-determination" results in empire. Capitalism is only sustained by growth. Recognizing this does not imply that one is against national liberation, but rather it provides us with a critical anti-capitalist lense to understand national liberation through. With this understanding, we can move forward with the recognition that Russia and Iran, for example, are not anti-imperialist by definition; they are emerging capitalist empires, whose interests in exploitation and territory may or may not be in conflict with the US (and each other), but are no different in form. Thus, their interventions in Syria are imperial interventions; and given that Assad could not have survived the popular revolution without Russian and Iranian backing, we believe it is a farce to refer to the Assad regime as an expression of national self-determination¹².

Aside from the comfortable certainty of following the simplistic Cold War binary logic, underlying the geopolitically motivated support for Bashar Al-Assad by some is the vague goal of capitalist multipolarity. The theoretical underpinnings of this can be found in Lenin, the Monthly Review school, and Dependency theorists like Samir Amin — and it is important to challenge this goal as both an illusion and counter-revolutionary. Under this theory of imperialism, imperialism is driven by the interests of monopoly capital, whose interests and institutions have been fused with finance and the

¹⁸ money.cnn.com

¹⁹ sputniknews.com

¹¹ antidotezine.com

¹² www.sbs.com.au

state¹³. Thus imperialism is an expression monopoly power in the global market, and the anti-imperialist position is to engage in national liberation struggles against the monopoly capitalists of the imperial core. Notably, what is emphasized in this framework is the struggle between states that represent capitalists, while the struggle between labor and capital moves to the side. We have seen historically how this has usually amounted to Popular Frontism and justification for allying with the national bourgeoisie in what is essentially an exaggerated version of a small business position; if what is most important is to eject the foreign monopoly capitalists, then an alliance with national capitalists is justified. Indeed, this strategy is what propelled the Syrian Baathist regime initially in the 1960s, just as it did for Ayatollah in Iran in the 70's. In both cases, the strategy left progressive forces vulnerable to reactionary forces within the front, and capitalism and conservatism were reinforced.¹⁴¹⁵

The notion that it is absolutely necessary that we pick sides within inter-capitalist rivalries for the sake of resisting monopoly is a dead end and founded upon two crucial bourgeois political economic assumptions: that capitalist competition allocates resources efficiently and optimally, and that the monopoly is the opposite of competition (refer back to my last piece on monopoly capital theory). In point of fact, there is no evidence that capitalist competition allocates resources better than capitalist monopoly, and all monopoly that exists is in fact intense oligopolistic competition. Prices are not determined by market power or lack thereof (as bourgeois economists claim), but determined by the severity of labor exploitation¹⁶. **Indeed, what matters for workers**

¹³ www.marxists.org

¹⁴ www.marxist.com

¹⁵ Moghadam, Valentine M. "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran"

¹⁶ Shaikh, Anwar. Capitalism: Competition, Crises, Conflict. 69

is not primarily the power relations between capitalists or capitalist nations, but the power relations between labor and capital. In fact, a 2010 study shows that income inequality in the US grew simultaneously with a decline in large firms; this counter-intuitive development begins to make sense when we consider the more salient fact that this increase in income inequality coincides with a decline in organized labor¹⁷. Class composition still matters; the national capitalists will betray workers just as fast as monopoly capitalists, and rejecting the monopolists without rejecting capitalism is a limited approach.

We oppose monopoly and monopoly capitalists as much as anyone, but we have to be both accurate about how monopoly operates in relation to capitalist competition, as well as be critical toward the road that has led to Popular Frontism and state capitalism repeatedly. A "multipolar world" of several competing capitalist empires cannot be merely assumed to be "historically progressive", as it says next to nothing about the relationship between the exploiters and the exploited, it doesn't address resource distribution issues on its own, and in fact, without the class component, it can only result in more exploitation and war as a result of increased competition among capitals. The hegemony of the US must be challenged, but under the direction of and in the interests of workers and marginalized peoples.

In the case of the Assad regime, the guise of multipolarity allows imperial intervention and neoliberalism to be equated with anti-imperialism and even socialism. By turning the conflict into a disingenuous and bourgeois geopolitical exercise, class struggle is left to the wayside by the authoritarian left. The biggest and most determinative monopoly that exists is the monopoly that capitalists hold on productive resources — it would be best if we did not ignore that.

¹⁷ thenextrecession.wordpress.com