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Summary: Notes from a presentation to the West Coast Chapter of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, held at the Westside Peace Center, Los Angeles. Critiques positions of some on the Left and discusses the position on Syria of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization -- Editors

## How to Think About Syria? Anti-Imperialism, Assad Regime Barbarism, and the Search for an Alternative

**Kevin Anderson**

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Why this meeting? Not just to discuss differences on the Left, but also because those differences speak to who we are, to what are our *goals*, not just our strategy or tactics.

We need to consider how Marx opposed not only British capitalism and Russian Tsarist despotism, but also the Bonapartist regime in France. Bonapartism had established itself as an iron dictatorship in the 1850s, yet it claimed the emancipatory heritage of the French revolution of 1789. Bonaparte opposed Britain and Russia and claimed to support the working classes. At the same time, France was undergoing a rapid capitalist development under which workers were brutally exploited in factories and mines, something the regime did nothing about. Bonapartist politics disoriented a whole generation, which was why it was so dangerous for the real, working class and democratic movements of the time.

When Trotsky organized against both capitalism and Stalinism, this was to make clear that a genuine revolution not only overthrew capitalism, but also opposed

anything short of direct rule by the working classes, as against a monstrous totalitarian state that ruled in their name while oppressing them. This was *crucial* in defining who we are, by saying who we are not. Unfortunately, Trotsky stopped halfway, and claimed that nonetheless, Stalin's Russia was superior to Western capitalism because it had nationalized the means of production.

Neither Stalinism nor Bonapartism exists today in explicit form outside odd places like North Korea. But the *attitudes on the left* that allowed for them to disorient it do persist. That is why in our new Constitution of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization (IMHO), we take note of some very specific dividing lines on the left. We do this not to be sectarian, but because we think a socialist, humanist perspective remains abstract unless it confronts some concrete points of contention among revolutionaries.

Therefore, our Constitution states on p. 2: "Because we had supported the Iranian Revolution of 1979 while denouncing the anti-women, anti-youth, and anti-labor fundamentalist takeover, we supported Iran's 2009-10 mass democratic upheaval. We have also supported the Arab revolutions of 2011 while pointing to the dangers stemming from their internal contradictions as well as imperialist entanglement."

It continues: "We oppose reactionary forms of anti-imperialism, whether in the form of religious fundamentalism, narrow nationalism, or military-populism. We opposed the first Iraq War of 1991 while, at the same time, we supported the freedom movement of the Kurdish people. During the 1990s, we supported Bosnia-Herzegovina's struggle for a multiethnic society in the face of Serbian genocide, the struggle of Chiapas in the face of globalized capitalism, and the independence movements of Kosova. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, we have opposed the U.S. doctrine of permanent war while supporting both the antiwar movement and the freedom struggles of Iraqi, Iranian, and Afghan women."

With all that in mind, let us look at Syria today.

As Lenin once said, “Dialectics requires an all-round consideration of relationships in their concrete development but not a patchwork of bits and pieces.” (Trade Union Debate, 1920)

What would that mean in the case of Syria today?

1. Look at the internal struggle for revolution against the regime, which began as a democratic struggle based among the poorest regions.
2. Look also at the relationship of this to the Arab uprisings of early 2011. Was it fundamentally different in character just because Assad regime had a track record of some opposition to Western imperialism and to Israeli occupation? No.
3. Look at the role of foreign powers, like Iran and Russia on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar on the other, with U.S. giving mainly verbal support to the uprising.
4. Look at the development of the revolution in Syria, from mass protests met with massacre, to the emergence of a people's army, the Free Syrian Army, to the more recent involvement of reactionary fundamentalist groups. Also look at how this has antagonized religious minorities and Kurds, drawing some of them back toward the regime. Still, fundamentalists are a clear minority.
5. Look also at regime's recourse to fundamentalist Shia Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon.
6. What effect would U.S. intervention have had on other powers in region, especially Iran, where it could have derailed some recent moves toward liberalization?
7. Finally, look at U.S. moves toward intervention, stymied by public opinion in UK and U.S., but still a possibility down the line. Look at the issue of chemical weapons use, a major war crime, pretty obviously on the part of the Assad regime.

What do we conclude from such an all-rounded analysis?

- We need to support the Syrian revolutionary movement and oppose the reactionary Assad regime.
- We need to do so critically, especially with respect to the fundamentalists.
- We need to oppose U.S. bombing, but equally to oppose military intervention by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.

This position is held by the IMHO, with somewhat similar ones by the International Socialist Organization and Egyptian revolutionary socialists.

How has the global Left reacted?

One part of the Left (Hugo Chavez supporters, ANSWER Coalition, the Castro brothers, *Counterpunch*, etc.) has actually supported Assad. These, along with pro-Assad Syrians, formed part of the antiwar demonstrations in LA. They hope for the defeat of the revolution and the victory of Assad regime, a real possibility now, but probably not the most likely one. This is a formalistic position: Assad is anti-imperialist, we oppose imperialism, and therefore Assad is our ally. For this type of Left, one just needs to use the template of earlier posters and change "Hands Off Iraq" or "Hands Off Libya" to "Hands Off Syria."

A second group (Amy Goodman of Pacifica radio, etc.) has seen brutality on "both sides" and calls for an amorphous "political settlement." This has no relationship to reality, especially in terms of the uncompromising brutality of Assad regime, which has never once negotiated except to buy time, the better to arm itself to massacre the people.

A third group (anarchist Bill Weinberg, Syrian revolutionary Yassin al-Haj Saleh) has called for U.S intervention and is disappointed it did not attack last week. This is also unrealistic, as U.S. has no interest in victory of Syrian revolution.

A fourth group (*News & Letters*, etc.) has opposed Assad and supported the revolution while remaining silent on intervention. (See Gerry Emmett, "Syria regime's genocidal gas attacks," *N&L*, Sept.-Oct. 2013). While at least on the side of the revolution, this position too is formalistic, as is the ANSWER one. In fact it is a mechanical, thoughtless photocopy of our position on Bosnia in the 1990s, established for the most part by people who are now no longer in *N&L* but in the IMHO. (See *Bosnia-Herzegovina: Achilles Heel of Western 'Civilization'* (1996).) One really needs to make an analysis and not just repeat an older one on Bosnia in cookie-cutter fashion. Bosnians did fight -- albeit in democratic but not socialist terms -- for the principle of multiethnicity, this vs. Serbian and Croatian neofascist nationalists. Thus, we supported them. But Syria is a different kettle of fish. Real, reactionary fundamentalists are part of the uprising. It is not enough therefore to say down with the regime, support the masses. Even the masses can make errors, not least in whom they support. Therefore our support has to be very critical in such a context.

Let me end by quoting our IMHO statement of Aug. 30, 2013, "Against U.S Attacks on Syria! Against the Assad Regime and Other Reactionary Forces! For the Grassroots Syrian Revolution!"

<http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/u-s-attack-syria-assad-regime-reactionary-forces-grassroots-syrian-revolution-international-marxist-humanist-organization>:

First we pointed to dangers confronting uprising: "For their part, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar have been funding Islamist or jihadist elements in the armed resistance to Assad. These elements seem to have come to the fore for another, more internal, reason as well: the descent of some parts of the Free Syrian Army into warlordism."

Then we concluded: "Therefore, in affirming our opposition to U.S. imperialist intervention, as well as that of all other powers, from Saudi Arabia to Iran, we also affirm our solidarity with what remains of the genuinely revolutionary and

democratic elements of the Syrian uprising. In no way we will allow our firm opposition to a U.S. attack on Syria to lessen our opposition to the Assad's murderous state-capitalist regime, which stands in the way of the liberation of the workers, women, youth and national minorities in Syria and the region as a whole.”