



# The war in Syria and its regional and global impact

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1. The impact of the civil war in Syria has spread from the local to the regional, and finally to the intercontinental level, with the exodus of millions of refugees fleeing the intolerable destruction wrought primarily by the Assad regime's bombing, by the reactionary Islamist forces of ISIS and, lately, by the direct involvement of the armed forces of US and Russian imperialism. Estimates vary from 220,000 to 310,000 having been killed and 7.6 million displaced, of whom 4.18 million have fled Syria, 2.07 million to Turkey and over 1 million to Lebanon. In 2015, as of 10 September, 432,761 refugees have crossed the Mediterranean and the Aegean; the majority coming from Syria.

2. The initiator of this gigantic human tragedy was the totalitarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, but it was made worse by the interventions of counter-revolutionary regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran and, increasingly, by the rival imperialist powers; the United States and Russia. Two reactionary outcomes are possible; a clash between these (nuclear) powers with incalculable consequences, or an agreement to finally strangle what is left of the Syrian revolution and impose counterrevolutionary settlements across the entire region. After initial widespread expressions of sympathy for refugee children, drowning on the shores of Europe, governments within the EU, starting with Hungary, have started to close frontiers and erect metal barriers, and their media have returned to narratives of 'swarms', 'floods', 'invasions' etc. Linked to this is the deal between the EU and Turkey to block or reduce the numbers of refugees escaping through that country.

3. Russia has massively increased its intervention, purportedly to fight Islamist terrorists but, in fact, to launch a full-scale offensive to the north around Aleppo, mobilising not just Syrian but also Iranian and Hezbollah forces, and forcing another 70,000 people to flee. Russia is intervening first and foremost to back up the Assad dictatorship which, earlier this year, seemed to be tottering, and to enable it to counterattack primarily the non-Islamist and so-called moderate Islamist rebels rather than ISIS. The western powers (US, France and Britain) have meanwhile begun to plan intensified aerial attacks within Syria, under the pretext that this will somehow aid the refugees or at least stop them fleeing Syria and heading for Europe.

4. Major regional powers aiding the mayhem are Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, on the side of the rebels, and, on the side of the regime, Iran, Hezbollah (a state within a state in Lebanon) and Iraqi Shia forces. In Turkey, the AKP premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, despite having turned a blind eye to the passage through Turkish territory of war materiel and ISIS fighters when they were attacking the Kurds in Kobane, has allowed the US to use the Nato airbase in Incirlik for its air war in Syria. In return, the US maintained diplomatic silence over the renewal of Ankara's war against PKK guerillas and its own Kurdish civilian population. Even the wave of attacks mounted against the Kurdish HDP party offices and meetings in the run up to the November general election has been passed over in near total silence. Nor have the massacres by suicide bombers in Suruç and Ankara, where 33 and then over 100 were killed, brought Western criticism of a government which did nothing to prevent the attacks or protect peaceful demonstrators. All this despite the fact that the Rojava Kurds' PYD has long been the only effective force fighting ISIS. All this demonstrates the gigantic fraud of the 'war against the Islamic State'.

5. Israel, too, is playing its usual role of supporting whatever side will weaken the state or forces which present the greatest threat to it and now seems to have done some sort of deal with Russia since the large scale offensive began. Meanwhile, it is using the Syrian war as a distraction to step up harassment of Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank, provoking what has been called a third intifada; maintaining a five-to-one kill rate whilst western media focus on

terror attacks by Palestinians.

6. The 'Islamic State' (IS, ISIS, ISil) is a horror story for both camps, partly as a result of its media-savvy promotion of its own genuinely barbaric acts. Of course, equally barbaric acts by the USA, Russia, not to speak of those of the Assad and Saudi regimes, are not given anything like the same media coverage. ISIS has been allowed to grow because it is not the prime target of any of these forces, for all their protestations. Some, like the Syrian regime itself and the Turkish government, have long adopted a position of at best benign neglect of ISIS as long as its actions were targeted at their own number one enemies; the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its allies, or the Rojava Kurds (PYD). In short, a nominal war against the truly disgusting mock caliphate has been a stalking horse for the conflicting objectives of the two imperialist camps and their increasingly independent and often troublesome allies.

7. None of the outside forces are intervening in support of the goals of the original democratic uprising of 2011. The Syrian Spring, beginning on 15 March 2011, was a genuine, popular, mass revolutionary uprising which, by June, had been forced to defend itself arms in hand by the regime's massacres and torturing of prisoners. By July, defecting officers from the regime had formed the Free Syrian Army and local defence forces and democratic committees sprang up in areas liberated from the regime. However, outside intervention soon began with Turkey supporting and helping to organise the FSA. By early 2012, the period in which mass mobilisation by the civilian population was possible was over and the full-scale civil war began. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, targets and bitter foes of the Arab Spring uprisings, intervened in Syria to promote Sunni salafist militia groups; the former supporting Ahrar ash-Sham and the latter Jabhat al-Nusra. These and other Islamist groups have come to predominate in the northern liberated areas around Idlib and Aleppo, whilst the FSA continues to dominate in the south around Deraa, the cradle of the Syrian revolution, and along the Lebanese border.

8. The FSA has received limited support from the US and other western states, though not as much as the more radical Islamist groups have received from the Saudis and Qataris, which accounts in large measure for their growing weight within the rebel forces. Many fighters, even whole units, have transferred mainly to get weapons, not for ideological reasons. They, and the other more secular parts of the rebel forces who share illusions in the democratic credentials of the US and the European Union, have repeatedly called for those powers to intervene more decisively. However, the Obama administration, though belligerently demanding the exit of Assad himself, wishes at all costs to preserve the existing state machine of the Baathist dictatorship, fearing a repeat of the destruction of the Saddam regime in Iraq. This is in keeping with its support for President and Field Marshall Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's restored military-police dictatorship in Egypt and the highly repressive Saudi regime currently committing atrocities on a mass scale in Yemen.

9. Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime in Russia has been praised by some who consider themselves on the left for 'standing up to US imperialism'. This is the height of folly. It is certainly true that Russia is both militarily and economically far weaker than the USA and its Nato allies, and that the US has aggressively advanced Nato membership in eastern Europe by installing a right wing nationalist regime in Kiev by a coup spearheaded by fascist militias, but none of this makes Putin a champion of anti-imperialism.

10. Putin's motives in Syria are just as imperialist as the USA's, just more modest and conservative, whatever the New Cold War hysteria in the western press makes out. As a long-term ally, the Assad regime is one of Russia's few remaining assets and Syria is the site of its only naval base outside of its own borders (Tartus). Besides this, Russia has reason to fear the US policy of fomenting faux democratic revolutions (colour or flower ones) as well as the nightmare of a genuine revolution in Russia that could begin around its own corrupt and repressive regime. Stability in the Middle East is, therefore, a very high priority for Putin and, for this reason, he is seeking good relations with both Egypt and with Israel, and with some success.

11. What then should be the policy of revolutionary socialists, indeed all parts of the working class movement, towards the Syrian crisis, the imperialist interventions, actual or threatened, and to consequences like the refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe? Firstly, we should give no support whatsoever to Russia or America's interventions or war mongering in the country. Indeed, we should call for the withdrawal of all their forces from the entire region. Secondly, we should equally condemn the interference of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan etc. and demand the

withdrawal of their troops, volunteers, and sectarian militias. We should, however, continue to support all those fighting to overthrow the Assad regime in order to replace it with a democratic regime that protects the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities and allows the working class freedom for its parties and trade unions to fight for a socialist Syria and a socialist Middle East.

12. The tragedy of the first phase of the Syrian revolution was that the revolutionaries were unable to break the hegemony of the Ba'athist organisations over the bulk of the working class or their hold over their social base amongst the minority ethnic groups. Had they been able to do so, this would have more speedily and more completely undermined Assad's armed forces. In short, the Syrian revolution ran into the problem that faced the entire Arab Spring. A genuine mass uprising by youth and militant sections of the working class met an acute crisis of proletarian leadership. The tiny groups of courageous revolutionary socialists, that had survived and begun to reform under dictatorships supported by the imperialist powers, were unable to attain mass influence for a programme that put the working class centre stage and raised socialist as well as democratic goals. The Arab Spring required, and resistance to the rampant counter-revolution still requires, the creation of a revolutionary party capable of doing this. The cadres to do this undoubtedly exist amongst the fighters and resisting communities in Syria and in the Kurdish liberated zones as well as amongst the huge, newly created, Syrian diaspora.

13. Since Syrian freedom will only be secured in a Middle East free of its present rulers as well as their imperialist patrons, leftists around the world must highlight and support the struggle of the Kurds in Syria and Turkey for the right to self-determination, free of all coercion. We need to continue to support the resistance to all armies of intervention and occupation, for example, in Yemen. We need to support the resistance to al-Sisi's dictatorship in Egypt, taking inspiration from the fact that the massive boycott of his fraudulent parliamentary election indicates that illusions in his regime are fast dissipating. We need to defend the Turkish and Kurdish workers and youth against the increasingly repressive regime of Erdoğan and the AKP. Should he fail to intimidate voters into giving him an overall majority, some form of state of emergency, or a 'constitutional coup?', is a real threat and will have to be resisted. Last, but not the least, we must support the struggle of the Palestinians against the latest phase of Zionist repression and takeover of their country.

14. In Europe, where as many as a million refugees may arrive before the end of the year, we have to say openly and without equivocation; open the borders to all those seeking asylum, provide them with homes and jobs and a warm welcome into the labour movements across the continent. All of the struggles in the Middle East are integrally linked to one another and show the need for creating out of them the forces of a New, Fifth International, a world party of the working class.

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