

Decriminalizing Bashar al Assad: Towards a More Effective Anti-War Movement

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On 10 April 1993, one of the greatest heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle, [Chris Hani](#), was gunned down by a neo-fascist in an attempt to disrupt the seemingly inexorable process of bringing majority rule to South Africa. Although direct legal culpability for this tragic assassination belonged to only two men – a Polish immigrant by the name of Janusz Waluś and a senior Conservative Party MP named Clive Derby-Lewis – the crime formed part of a much wider onslaught against the ANC and its allies. This onslaught – paramilitary, political, legal, psychological, journalistic – was not primarily conducted by fringe lunatics such as Waluś and Derby-Lewis, but by the mainstream white political forces and their puppets within the black community (such as the Inkatha Freedom Party). The leaders of the ANC, and particularly the MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed liberation movement with which Chris Hani’s name will forever be associated) were subjected to a wide-ranging campaign of demonisation. This campaign created conditions such that political assassinations of anti-apartheid leaders became expected, almost inevitable. Of course, the more ‘dovish’ leaders of the main white party, the National Party, were quick to denounce Hani’s assassination; but the truth is that they were at least partly responsible for it.

Speaking at Hani’s funeral, [Nelson Mandela spoke](#) of this phenomenon: “To criminalise is to outlaw, and the hunting down of an outlaw is regarded as legitimate. That is why, although millions of people have been outraged at the murder of Chris Hani, few were really surprised. Those who have deliberately created this climate that legitimates political assassinations are as much responsible for the death of Chris Hani as the man who pulled the trigger.”

Turning to the current situation in Syria, we see a parallel between the “climate that legitimates political assassinations” in early-90s South Africa and a media climate that legitimates the “[limited military strikes](#)” being planned in Washington.

The Syrian state has been under direct attack by western imperialism for the last two and a half years (although the US and others have been “[accelerating the work of reformers](#)” for much longer than that). The forms of this attack are many: [providing weapons and money](#) to opposition groups trying to topple the government; implementing [wide-ranging trade sanctions](#); providing [practically unlimited space](#) in the media for the opposition whilst effecting a near-total media blackout on pro-government sources; and relentlessly slandering the Syrian president and government. In short, the western media and governments have – consciously and deliberately – “created this climate that legitimates” a military regime change operation against Syria.

An anti-war movement that takes part in war propaganda

Building a phoney case for imperialist regime change is, of course, [not unusual](#). What is really curious is that the leadership of the anti-war movement in the west – the people whose clear responsibility is to build the widest possible opposition to war on Syria – has been actively participating in the propaganda and demonisation campaign. Whilst opposing direct military strikes, they have nonetheless given consistent support to the regime change operation that such strikes are meant to consummate.

Wilfully ignoring the indications that the Syrian government is [very popular](#), Tariq Ali – perhaps the most recognisable figure in the British anti-war movement – feels able to claim that “the overwhelming majority of the Syrian people want the Assad family out”. Indeed, he [explicitly calls for foreign-assisted regime change](#), saying “non-violent pressure has to be kept up externally to tell Bashar he has to go.”

Rising star of the British left Owen Jones used his high-profile Independent column of 25 August this year (just as the war rhetoric from Cameron, Hollande and Kerry was reaching fever pitch) to [voice his hatred](#) of the “gang of thugs” and “glorified gangsters” that run Syria, before worrying that “an attack could invite retaliation from Iran and an escalation of Russian’s support for Assad’s thugs, helping to drag the region even further into disaster.” Jones evidently doesn’t know very much about Syria, but that doesn’t stop him from participating in the Ba’ath-bashing: last year, his response to a bomb attack in Damascus which killed several Syrian ministers was the gleeful “[Adios, Assad](#) (I hope)”.

According to Stop the War Coalition national officer [John Rees](#), “no-one can minimise the barbarity of the Assad regime, nor want to defend it from the justified rage of its own people.” Any objectively progressive actions ever taken by the Syrian government (such as its support for Palestine and Hezbollah) are nothing more than “[self-interested and calculated acts of state policy](#)” – which claim is rather reminiscent of the Financial Times [accusing](#) Hugo Chávez of “demagogy” in pushing for land reform in Venezuela!

Rees is [only too clear](#) that the number one enemy for Syrians is the government, and that pro-west sectarian Saudi-funded rebels are a secondary enemy – a position virtually indistinguishable from the Israelis, who [state](#): “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” Further, Rees believes that what is really needed is to “give the revolutionaries the chance to shake off their pro-western leaders and defeat Assad.” That’s presumably if they’re not too busy [eating human hearts](#) or [murdering people on the basis of their religious beliefs](#).

These are not isolated examples. It is decidedly rare to find a British anti-war leader mentioning Bashar al-Assad and his government in anything but an intensely negative light. Bashar is “brutal”; he is a “dictator”; he [should be indicted](#) at the International Criminal Court. Frankly, this leader of independent, anti-imperialist Syria is subjected to far more severe abuse from the mainstream left than are the leaders of Britain, France and the US. In the imperialist heartlands of North America and Western Europe, the [defence of](#) (Preview) [Syria has](#) (Preview) [been left to a](#) (Preview) [small minority](#), although thankfully the (far more important) left movements in [Venezuela](#), [Cuba](#), [Nicaragua](#) and elsewhere have a much richer understanding of anti-imperialist solidarity.

At the risk of stating the bleedin’ obvious: if you’re trying to spread anti-war sentiment and build the most effective possible movement against military action, then taking part in the demonisation of the country under threat is probably not a very smart strategy.

This campaign of propaganda, lies and slander has been very effective in creating a public opinion that is ambivalent at best in relation to the attack that is under preparation. Whilst most people may be “against” bombing Syria in principle, to what extent are they passionate enough to actually *do* anything to prevent this criminal, murderous act from taking place? Two million people marched against war in Iraq (and given the right leadership, they would have been willing to do considerably more than just march); yet no demonstration against war on Syria has attracted more than a couple of thousand people. Would thousands of people be willing to participate in direct action? Would they be willing to conduct, say, a one-week general strike? Would workers follow the great example of the [Rolls Royce workers in East Kilbride](#) and actively disrupt imperialist support for regime change? Highly unlikely. And this is because all they have heard about Syria – from the radical left to the fundamentalist right to the Saudi-sponsored Muslim organisations – is that Bashar al-Assad is a brutal dictator whose overthrow is long overdue.

OK, but haven't we just prevented a war?

In the light of the House of Commons exhibiting an unusual level of sense by [voting against Cameron's motion](#) authorising use of force against Syria, some anti-war activists were quick to [claim](#) that the “sustained mass power of the anti-war movement” has “undoubtedly been a decisive factor.” Members of this movement should “[recognise what we have achieved in recent weeks](#) : we have stopped the US and Britain from waging a war that, if the British parliament had voted the other way, would already have taken place, with who knows what consequences.”

Now, optimism and jubilation have their place, but they shouldn't be used to deflect valid criticism or avoid serious reflection. Anybody who has been involved in the anti-war movement in Britain over the past decade will have noticed the level of activity steadily dwindling. Just two years ago, we witnessed a vicious war fought by the western imperialist powers (with Britain one of the major instigators) in order to effect regime change in Libya. [Over 50,000 died](#). [Murderous racists](#) were brought to power. A [head of state was tortured and murdered](#) , while [imperialism celebrated](#). Decades of development – that had turned Libya from a colonial backwater into the country with the [highest living standards in Africa](#)– have been turned back. Stop the War Coalition weren't able to mobilise more than a [tiny protest](#) against this war, and yet we are expected to believe that, two years later, Britain suddenly has a vibrant and brilliantly effective anti-war movement capable of preventing war on Syria? This is [obviously not the case](#).

Regardless of how much attention the British public pays to the anti-war movement, the fact is that public opinion in the west is only a small factor in the much larger question of the balance of forces. Syria is different to Libya in that it has [powerful allies](#) and that it has never disarmed. Furthermore, it shares a border with Israel and is capable of doing some serious damage to imperialism's most important ally in the Middle East. This makes military intervention a highly dangerous and unpredictable option from the point of view of the decision-makers in Washington, London and Paris.

The uprising was supposed to take care of this problem. A successful ‘Arab Spring’ revolution – [armed, trained and funded by the west](#) and its regional proxies in Saudi, Turkey, Qatar and Jordan – would have installed a compliant government and would have constituted an essential milestone in the imperialist-zionist regional strategy: the breakup of the [resistance axis](#) and the overthrow of [all states unwilling to go along with imperialist](#)

[diktat](#). This strategy – seemingly so difficult for western liberals and leftists to comprehend – is [perfectly well understood](#) by the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah: “What is happening in Syria is a confrontation between the resistance axis and the U.S./Israeli axis. They seek aggression against the resistance axis through Syria in order to destroy Syria’s capabilities and people, marginalize its role, weaken the resistance and relieve Israel.”

Beyond the Middle East, a successful ‘revolution’ in Syria would of course be a vital boost to the US-led global strategy: protecting US hegemony and [containing the rise of China](#), Russia and the other major developing nations.

And yet, in spite of massive support given to the armed opposition; in spite of the relentless propaganda campaign against the Syrian government; in spite of [Israeli bombing raids](#) on Damascus; in spite of a brutal and tragic campaign of [sectarian hatred](#) being conducted by the rebels; in spite of the blanket support given to the rebels by the [imperialists](#) and [zionists](#); [the Syrian Arab Army is winning](#). The tide has clearly turned and the momentum is with the patriotic forces. [Hezbollah have openly joined the fray](#). Russia has [sent its warships](#) to the region and has demonstrated some genuine [creative brilliance](#) in the diplomatic field in order to prevent western military strikes. Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela and others have been immovable in their demands for a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis.

Nobody in imperialist policy circles expected things to turn out like this. The ‘revolution’ was supposed to have succeeded long ago. As a result, the western ruling classes have moved from a firm, united policy (i.e. help the rebels to victory and then ‘assist the transition to democracy’) to chaos, confusion and division. There are hawkish elements that want to bomb their way to victory, and there are more cautious/realistic elements that realise this would be an incredibly dangerous course of action for the western powers and for Israel. Imperialism is faced with a very delicate, even impossible, balance: trying to preserve its increasingly fragile hegemony whilst actively attacking the global counter-hegemonic process. It is a case of “damned if they do and damned if they don’t”.

Such divisions within the ruling circles in the west are to be welcomed, but it would be an act of significant deception to claim victory for a western anti-war movement that has persistently refused to ally itself with global anti-imperialism.

Decriminalise and defend Syria

If we are going to build an anti-war movement capable of mobilising people in a serious way to actually counter imperialist war plans for Syria, we cannot continue with the hopeless [“neither imperialism nor Assad”](#) position, which is designed to avoid the obvious question: when imperialism is fighting against the Syrian state, which side should we be on?

A far more viable anti-war slogan is: *Defend Syria from imperialist destabilisation, demonisation and war.*

But can we really defend this brutal, oppressive, repressive regime? Wasn’t the much-missed Hugo Chavez just being a bit of a nutcase when he expressed his fondness for [“brother President Bashar al-Assad”](#) and worked to counter the offensive against Syria by [shipping fuel to it](#)?

As with so many things, we have to start with a total rejection of the mainstream media

narrative. The country they paint as a brutally repressive police state, a prison of nations, a Cold War relic, is (or was, until the war started tearing it apart) a dignified, safe, secular, modern and moderately prosperous state, closely aligned with the socialist and non-aligned world (e.g. [Venezuela](#), [Cuba](#), [DPR Korea](#)), and one of the leading forces within the [resistance axis](#) - a bloc that the imperialists are [absolutely desperate](#) to break up.

In the [words of its president](#), Syria is “an independent state working for the interests of its people, rather than making the Syrian people work for the interests of the West.” For over half a century, it has stubbornly refused to play by the rules of imperialism and neoliberalism. [Stephen Gowans shows](#) that, in spite of some limited market reforms of recent years, “the Ba’athist state has always exercised considerable influence over the Syrian economy, through ownership of enterprises, subsidies to privately-owned domestic firms, limits on foreign investment, and restrictions on imports. These are the necessary economic tools of a post-colonial state trying to wrest its economic life from the grips of former colonial powers and to chart a course of development free from the domination of foreign interests.”

The Syrian government maintains a commitment to a strong welfare state, for example ensuring universal access to healthcare (in which area its performance has been [impressive](#)) and providing [free education at all levels](#). It has a long-established policy of secularism and multiculturalism, [protecting and celebrating its religious and ethnic diversity](#) and refusing to tolerate sectarian hatred.

Syria has done a great deal - perhaps more than any other country - to oppose Israel and support the Palestinians. It has long been the [chief financial and practical supporter of the various Palestinian resistance organisations](#), as well as of [Hezbollah](#). It has intervened militarily to prevent Israel’s expansion into Lebanon. It has provided a home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, who are [treated far better](#) than they are elsewhere in the Arab world. In spite of massive pressure to do so - and in spite of the obvious immediate benefits that it would reap in terms of security and peace - it has refused to go down the route of a bilateral peace treaty with Israel. Palestine is very much at the forefront of the Syrian national consciousness, as exemplified by the Syrians who went to the border with Israel on Nakba Day 2011 and were [martyred there at the hands of the Israeli ‘Defence’ Forces](#).

True to its Pan-Arabist traditions, Syria has also provided a home to [hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees](#) in the aftermath of NATO’s 2003 attack.

Whatever mistakes and painful compromises Ba’athist Syria has made over the years should be viewed in terms of the very unstable and dangerous geopolitical and economic context within which it exists. For example:

- It is in a permanent state of war with Israel, and has part of its [territory occupied](#) by the latter.
- While it has stuck to the principles of Arab Nationalism and the defence of Palestinian rights, the other frontline Arab states - Egypt and Jordan, along with the reactionary Gulf monarchies - have capitulated.
- It has suffered constant destabilisation by the western imperialist countries and their regional allies.
- It shares a border with the heavily militarised pro-western regime in Turkey.
- It shares a border with the chronically unstable Lebanon (historically a part of

Syria that was carved out in the 1920s by the French colonialists in order to create a Christian-dominated enclave).

- Its most important ally of the 70s and 80s – the Soviet Union – collapsed in 1991, leaving it in a highly precarious situation.
- Its economic burdens have been added to by [longstanding sanctions](#), significantly [deepened](#) in 2003 by George W Bush, specifically in response to Syria's support for resistance movements in the region.
- Its economic problems of recent years have also been exacerbated by the illegal imperialist war on Iraq, which created a refugee crisis of horrific proportions. Syria absorbed 1.5 million Iraqi refugees and has made significant sacrifices to help them. Given that "[Syria has the highest level of civic and social rights for refugees in the region](#)," it's not difficult to understand how its economic and social stability must have been affected.
- In recent years, Syria has been suffering from a [devastating drought](#) "impacting more than 1.3 million people, killing up to 85 percent of livestock in some regions and forcing 160 villages to be abandoned due to crop failures". The root of this problem is the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, as [one-third of Israel's water is supplied from Golan](#).
- Given the number of different religious sects and ethnicities within Syria, it has never been difficult for the west and its regional proxies to stir up tensions and create unrest.

While there is clearly a need to enhance popular democracy and to clamp down on corruption and cronyism (in what country is this not the case?), this is well understood by the state. As [Alistair Crooke writes](#): "There is this mass demand for reform. But paradoxically – and contrary to the 'awakening' narrative – most Syrians also believe that President Bashar al-Assad shares their conviction for reform."

So there is every reason to defend Syria. Not because it is some sort of socialist utopia, but because it is an independent, anti-imperialist, anti-zionist state that tries to provide a good standard of living for its people and which aligns itself with the progressive and counterhegemonic forces in the region and worldwide.

Tasks for the anti-war movement

If the anti-war movement can agree on the need to actively defend Syria, then its tasks become relatively clear:

1. Clearly explain to the public that this is not a revolution or a civil war, but an imperialist war of regime change where the fighting has been outsourced to sectarian religious terrorists. It is not part of a region-wide 'Arab Spring' process of "overthrowing reactionary regimes"; rather, it is part of a global process of destabilising, demonising, weakening and removing all states that refuse to play by the rules. It is this same process that brought about regime change in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Grenada, Nicaragua, Chile, Argentina, Congo, Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Brazil and elsewhere. This process was described in a very clear, straightforward way by Maurice Bishop, leader of the socialist government in Grenada that was overthrown 30 years ago: "*Destabilisation is the name given to the newest method of controlling and exploiting the lives and resources of a country and its people by a bigger and more powerful country through bullying, intimidation and violence... Destabilisation takes many forms:*

there is propaganda destabilisation, when the foreign media, and sometimes our own Caribbean press, prints lies and distortions against us; there is economic destabilisation, when our trade and our industries are sabotaged and disrupted; and there is violent destabilization, criminal acts of death and destruction... As long as we show the world, clearly and unflinchingly, that we intend to remain free and independent; that we intend to consolidate and strengthen the principles and goals of our revolution; as we show this to the world, there will be attacks on us."

2. Stop participating in the demonisation of the Syrian state. This demonisation – repeating the media’s lies against Syria, exaggerating the negative aspects of the Syrian state and downplaying all the positive things it has done – is totally demobilising. It is preventing the development of a meaningful, creative, courageous, audacious anti-war movement.
3. Campaign for an end to trade sanctions on Syria.
4. Campaign for an end to the arming and funding of rebel groups by the British, French and US governments and their stooges in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan and Kuwait.
5. Send peace delegations to Syria to observe the situation first hand and report back. The [recent delegation](#) by Cynthia McKinney, Ramsey Clark, Dedon Kamathi and others is an excellent example that should be emulated.
6. Campaign for wide-ranging industrial action in the case of military attack.
7. Support all processes leading to a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the Syrian crisis, reflecting the will of the vast majority of the Syrian people.

The defense of Syria is, at this point in time, the frontline of the struggle worldwide against imperialist domination. It is Korea in 1950, Vietnam in 1965, Algeria in 1954, Zimbabwe in 1970, Cuba in 1961, Nicaragua in 1981, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, Palestine since 1948. It’s time for us to step up.

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