

America's "Imperial-Left" and the Proxy War Against Syria

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Recently in June the American activist organisation 'Campaign for Peace and Democracy' (CPD) issued a 'Statement On Syria' supporting the so-called "Syrian revolution". If the CPD had issued a similar statement two years ago it would have been somewhat understandable given the fog of war at the time.

However by now it should be obvious to all ostensible peace and anti-war activists that there is nothing progressive or worth championing about the imperialist sponsored proxy war currently being waged against the Syrian government of President Dr. Bashar al-Assad; a war fuelled by foreign powers who have outsourced their attack on the Syrian nation to the worst elements in the region, namely the self-styled "Takfiris" and "Salafis" whose intolerant rhetoric and nightmarish vision for Syria should have been met with condemnation by the CPD, and not the naïve enthusiasm so shamelessly embodied in their Statement.

This article aims to counter many of the CPD's claims while also providing some important information regarding Syria's history and the nature of this conflict.

How It Began In Daraa

The CPD's portrayal of the conflict as one that began with peaceful demonstrations for democracy that were met with the brutal state violence betrays the true chronology of events. That the initial protests on the 17-18th of March 2011 in Daraa resulted in the deaths of four protesters and seven police officers, as well as the burning down of the Baath party headquarters and a courthouse is evidence there were armed elements among the ranks of the opposition from the very beginning (1). It's clear the armed elements used the cover of peaceful protests to launch their attacks, which then initiated a rather predictable response from state forces; eventually resulting in the distorted propaganda line parroted by the mainstream media that state forces attacked peaceful protestors. This modus operandi isn't new, as it closely resembles the government crackdown of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 (covered later), which also began in a similar manner. Given that over two years have passed since these events in Daraa, the CPD has no excuse for being completely oblivious to this side of the story.

The Numbers Game: Myth and Reality

The CPD argues that although "the rebels have also committed atrocities", that the "Assad regime" has been "the greatest perpetrator of violent outrages" even going so far as to imply that the "90,000 deaths and the displacement of some four million Syrians" is almost

entirely the fault of the Syrian government. Did it ever occur to the CPD that in war, total casualties include civilians and combatants?

Here's the breakdown of war casualties provided by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) (2) which cannot be accused of pro-government bias, as they are a pro-rebel and pro-NATO mouthpiece:

Syrian Arab Army (SAA): 24,617 (25.53%)
Pro Government Militias (NDF): 17,031 (17.66%)
Hezbollah Soldiers: 145 (0.15%)
Opposition Fighters: 16,699 (17.32%)
Civilian Non Combatants: 35,479 (36.79%)
Unaccounted Deaths: 2460 (2.55%)
Total Casualties: 96,431 (100%)

The CPD should ask itself, if the relatively more mechanised government army holds the military advantage against irregular guerrilla forces, why according to the SOHR have more soldiers on the government's side (SAA & NDF) been killed than opposition fighters? There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, as the footage taken in the aftermath of the Hatlah massacre (7) indicates, there's a tendency for rebel fighters to refer to the civilians they've massacred as "shabiha" (a pejorative term widely used by rebels to refer to pro-government militias), as such it's quite possible that rebel fighters would report to the SOHR that the civilians they've massacred were "pro-government militia". Secondly, as journalist Nir Rosen points out, when rebel fighters are killed they're often listed as civilians:

"Every day the opposition gives a death toll, usually without any explanation of the cause of the deaths. Many of those reported killed are in fact dead opposition fighters, but the cause of their death is hidden and they are described in reports as innocent civilians killed by security forces, as if they were all merely protesting or sitting in their homes." (3)

This 'accounting trick' has also been noted by Musa al-Gharbi:

"For instance, when it is stated that the majority of the victims of the conflict have been civilians, this number is achieved by conflating the dead non-military rebel fighters with non-combatants. While militiamen technically are civilians (simply by virtue of being non-military), the connotation of civilian is "non-combatant;" i.e., a victim of the conflict who was not actively taking part in it. In fact, this connotation is cynically exploited in delivering the statistic to people in order to make the regime seem as though they are "indiscriminately slaughtering their own people." (4)

As a heuristic device for analysing counter-insurgencies, i.e. wars fought between regular armies and guerrillas, one can rationally expect the deaths of two rebels for every government soldier killed (4). This would imply, based on the figures provided by the SOHR, that at least 51% of total casualties have been rebel fighters. That would take casualties of armed combatants to 77% of total casualties, which doesn't include the deaths of pro-government militia, the figure for which, as we've established earlier, is potentially unreliable owing to the SOHR's dubious accounting methods. Furthermore, the sectarian hatred and violence directed at Alawis by rebel forces, as seen in dozens of online videos, helps explain why, according to these rebel accountants themselves, 42% of total casualties

are listed as Alawis (2) making them overrepresented as casualties by a factor of four.

In short, a critical reading of the opposition's own figures, which are themselves heavily biased for the reasons mentioned earlier, would imply that the rebels, whose cause the CPD champions, are responsible for more mass death than any other party in this conflict. If the Syrian Army were as indiscriminate as the CPD implies they are, they wouldn't have bothered negotiating with the rebels in Qusayr to evacuate civilians, nor would they have allowed the rebels safe passage to leave the city on the condition they left their weapons behind (5).

As expected, those most vehemently opposed to saving civilian lives in Qusayr were the rebels themselves for whom evacuating civilians amounted to sacrificing an important bargaining chip. In the words of one of the mediators Ali Zaayter, "the fighters in Qusayr felt that if they let all the civilians go, then this might encourage the government to kill them" (6). There's another major difference between the two sides that the CPD ignores. Even in cases of alleged killings by state forces, at least attempts are made by the government to deny or downplay them as its considered shameful, whereas the rebels actually post videos online in which they carry out gruesome beheadings, brag about their atrocities, and encourage their target audience to engage in sectarian massacres themselves (7). Although the figures provided by the SOHR are unreliable for the reasons mentioned earlier, they do constitute an implied admission by a widely cited FSA-aligned source that a) a significant proportion of total casualties are combatants, not civilians; and (b) a significant proportion of civilian casualties are likely to be government sympathisers.

To fully explore these important considerations, readers should consult the Middle East Policy journal article Syria Contextualized: The Numbers Game by Musa al-Gharbi. That the CPD hasn't bothered consulting any academic sources, and have instead irresponsibly and without evidence placed all the blame on the Syrian government implies they're either ignorant of basic facts or consciously misleading the public. Which one is it?

Whose "Revolution" Is It Anyway?

The CPD writes, "we strongly oppose any diplomatic, not to mention military, intervention by outside powers that tries to dictate the shape of a future Syria". In other words it seems the CPD are supportive of foreign states effectively outsourcing this proxy war of theirs by financing the steady supply of foreign fighters, weapons and cash, but then feign moral indignation at the prospect of these states intervening directly with their own soldiers? More importantly it's entirely hypocritical for the CPD to "condemn the attempts by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf states to manipulate the Syrian revolution" when it's glaringly obvious that the rebels depend on their foreign benefactors to sustain their insurgency. So far Qatar has spent \$3 billion financing the rebellion (8) and now find themselves in a minor competition with Saudi Arabia for influence among the rebels. Qatari aid has included offering \$50,000 to defectors (8), which amounts to effectively bribing Syrians to abandon their government, and paying the salaries of the FSA thus making them the de facto employees of the Qatari royal family.

The Muslim Brotherhood's influence over the insurgency cannot be stressed enough since the funding it receives from Qatar in particular "results in the Brotherhood's monopolization of council finances and resources" (5). This helps explain why the Brotherhood, which officially holds only a minority of seats in the Syrian National Coalition, has managed to control two-thirds of the Supreme Military Council's (SMC) leadership positions (9).

Indeed the SMC's Chief of Staff General Salim Idris has already indicated a willingness to work with Islamists thus implying there's no ideological inconsistency between the goals of the various rebel factions. Idris also admitted that 50 percent of the rebels are Islamists (9), which is likely a gross underestimate since prior attempts to sideline the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra as the bad rebels were met with a united declaration by 29 FSA groups who declared "we are all al-Nusra!" (10), thus demonstrating the popularity of the "extremists" and their ideology. After all according to the New York Times "nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of" (11).

Turkey has been hosting up to ten thousand FSA fighters from as early as October 2011 (12), and has from the early days of the conflict been using its Hatay province as a base of operations for fighters and weapons entering Syria. More recently it has been reported that between April 2012 and March this year, 70 cargo planes of weapons have been shipped from Qatar to Turkey to be distributed among rebel groups (8). Meanwhile Israel has made it clear that overthrowing the Syrian government would serve their interests, with the former Defense Minister Ehud Barak (13), and Senior Defense Ministry official Amos Gilad (14) both making it clear that overthrowing the Syrian government would isolate Iran and strategically benefit Israel. To this end Israel has directly attacked Syria twice, and allowed rebels to operate from within the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (33).

Although Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have done most of the heavy lifting in funding the insurgency, there is much to suggest U.S. policy makers planned this proxy war for at least a decade prior. Look at the course of events. In 2002 Syria was included in the second tier 'Axis of Evil' or 'Beyond the Axis of Evil' as it was described by then Undersecretary of State John Bolton. In 2004 the United States imposed sanctions on Syria to restrict American exports, followed by financial sanctions in 2006 (15). Also, according to retired U.S. General Wesley Clark, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there were plans at the highest levels in Washington that involved overthrowing the governments of a number of countries including Syria (16).

Over the course of the war, and despite sections of the U.S. political establishment warning against fuelling the conflict, the U.S. has consistently offered significant diplomatic, financial and material support for the insurgency (17)(18)(19)(20)(21). In addition to this, that the European Union lifted the oil embargo on Syria, thereby allowing the rebels to sell Syrian oil from the areas they control, effectively amounts to financing the rebels via the theft of Syria's natural resources (22).

Given the evidence suggesting the U.S. proxy war was planned years in advance; given the United States' historic and continual hostility to Damascus; given the sheer scale of foreign interference in Syria's internal affairs; and given all the evidence suggesting this insurgency needed foreign assistance from the very beginning; it's monumentally naïve for the CPD to imply that these foreign states merely jumped on the bandwagon of an already "democratic movement" to manipulate it when all evidence suggests the "uprising" was an outcome of their meddling designs in the first place. Also, supposing this "uprising" is genuinely popular, why is it failing despite being so well financed?

Why Syria Is Being Targeted

The proxy war against Syria follows a consistent policy by the United States to dominate the energy rich middle east, especially since the ability of the U.S. to apply pressure on oil

producing states to sell in U.S. dollars thus bolstering their currency, greatly depends on their ability to project military power, as evidenced by the heavy concentration of military bases in the region. As a means to these ends, governments like Iran and Syria that refuse to cooperate with U.S. designs by allowing the installation of U.S. military bases on their territory, can expect to be threatened, sanctioned, destabilised, or even invaded.

However the U.S. doesn't always achieve its desired objectives, a prime example being the invasion Iraq, which was supposed to regain control over an important oil producer, but since Saddam Hussein's enemies were the natural allies of Iran, Iraq has for many years been shifting towards the Iranian sphere of influence (23). Toppling the Syrian government, often referred to as Iran's closest ally, appears to be the primary motivation for the United States whose regional allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar also have their own competitive rationale for wanting to weaken Iran.

Although Syria is not a major oil producer, one explanation in particular that deserves careful consideration as to why Syria is being targeted relates to the discovery in 2007 of the world's largest known natural gas reserves in the Persian Gulf, which was subsequently shared between Iran and Qatar. Iran then launched the PARS Pipeline project, which involved building a pipeline from the Persian Gulf, through Iraq, and ending on Syria's Mediterranean coast.

So far the pipeline has reached the outskirts of Damascus and is expected to be completed by next year. Meanwhile over the past few years the EU has been anxious to diversify its energy sources, and to this end started the Nambucco pipeline project in 2009, which would have sourced natural gas from the Caspian Sea through the Caucasus, Turkey, and the Balkans thereby reducing the EU's dependence on Russian gas. However the Nambucco project fell through a month ago owing to various disputes, while the rival Russian South-Stream pipeline that traverses the Black Sea on its route to Europe has been a success (24).

Once both these projects are fully operational it will mean that the EU, which at present receives a quarter of its natural gas from Russia, will in the foreseeable future depend on Iran and Russia for up to 50 percent of its natural gas supplies. As a result Qatar, with its portion of the Persian Gulf's natural gas, finds itself losing the competition for directly supplying the EU. This constitutes a major motivation explaining Qatar's specific interest in overthrowing the Syrian government as a means of sabotaging the PARS pipeline.

The Myth of the "Democratic Rebels"

It should be clear to all informed readers the CPD are attempting to insulate themselves from being criticised for supporting the "extremist Islamist militias" (their words) who dominate and control the armed insurgency, by inventing imaginary friends in the "democratic rebels" and "democratic opponents" who according to them supposedly constitute the essential core of the "revolution" and represent the Syrian masses.

Of course propagating this baseless assertion requires ignoring all evidence indicating that the majority of Syrians actually support their government. Indeed in November 2012, Time Magazine highlighted the unpopularity of the rebels in Syria's largest city Aleppo quoting rebel commander Abu Saadek (his nom de guerre) as saying "the Aleppans here, all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us, they tell the regime where we are, where we go, what we do, even now" (25).

More recently, according to data published this May by NATO, who also cannot be accused of pro-government bias, 70 percent of Syrians support President Assad, while only 10 percent support the rebels, the rest being undecided (26).

To be sure, the Syrian people do have legitimate grievances against their government, however to omit the obvious reality that President Bashar al-Assad still commands popular support, let alone imply the opposite, is entirely dishonest. It seems that in order to justify supporting this imperialist proxy war against Syria, many “Left” organisations including the CPD have peddled the myth of the “democratic revolution” that has only recently been undermined “by the growing strength of anti-democratic elements within the Syrian rebel forces”.

The CPD dedicates several paragraphs highlighting the dangers “extremist Islamists” who could “hijack the revolution” as if this didn’t happen two years ago when the Free Syrian Army was founded. However surely many of the CPD’s followers would be genuinely curious to know why they haven’t mentioned any pro-democratic elements? Surely if this were an uprising worth supporting, these “anti-democratic elements” would be in the minority, right? Perhaps the CPD can tell us more about these “democratic rebels”, their brigades, commanders, capabilities, funding sources, ideological motivations, and areas of operation? Of course they probably shouldn’t waste their time because these “democratic rebels” are more a figment of their imagination than they are actual actors in this conflict.

The Muslim Brotherhood: A History of Bloody Reaction

The one-size-fits-all approach adopted by much of the Left towards the so-called Arab Spring tends to reduce the unique historical experiences and complex political divisions of these different nations into a superficial dichotomy between authoritarian dictatorships on the one hand, and the people demanding democracy and freedom on the other. Syria is different in the sense that the current conflict can most accurately be understood as the latest in a series of Muslim Brotherhood led insurgencies that have regularly punctuated the Arab Republic’s post-independence history; and in every such instance, the armed opponents fighting to seize state power always clashed with the state for entirely reactionary reasons.

This should come as no surprise to those aware of the Brotherhood’s history as a party founded on the historic alliance between the Sunni religious establishment, and the Sunni bourgeoisie, landlords, and urban elites (27, p. 38); a party whose underlying class interests clashed with the land reforms, nationalizations, and generally redistributive economic policies of the Baath; a party with a long tradition of framing their struggle as one of the Alawi regime suppressing the Sunni majority (27, p. 103, 137); and like all bourgeois movements needing to conceal their real task of defending wealth and privilege, a party that resorts to sectarian identity politics to divide the masses against each other.

Consider the Brotherhood’s record. After the 1966 coup that brought Salah Jadid’s faction of the Baath party to power, the Brotherhood intensified its opposition to the government, not on principled political grounds, but because they resented the seizure of power by Alawis who they considered infidels unfit for executive office on the grounds that the Syrian constitution stipulated that the President must be a Muslim (29, p. 6). When this religious qualification was briefly omitted in 1973, the Brotherhood responded with violent protests (29, p. 6).

The Brotherhood’s special hatred for Alawis is all the more reactionary and elitist given that

prior to the Baathist coup, and especially during Syria's long history under Ottoman rule, Alawis were the poorest and most ostracised community in the region, often overrepresented among the ranks of the exploited peasant underclass, who toiled the fields of wealthy landlords for a pittance (28).

Upon seizing power, the Baath proceeded to break the stranglehold of the landlords over the peasantry thus enabling the latter to achieve major social advances, while the former, enraged by the shifting balance of power, rallied around the Brotherhood in the hopes of restoring their power and privilege. The 1982 crackdown against the Brotherhood in the city of Hama is often invoked by the Left as an example of the Syrian government's ruthlessness without considering the context, namely that in the three years prior to the crackdown, the Brotherhood had unleashed a campaign of open terrorism, beginning in 1979 with the Artillery School massacre (29, p. 5), followed by numerous massacres of government officials, Baath party members and their families, and those they deemed infidels (29, p. 6)(30, p. 332)(31, p. 182). Much like the Brotherhood backed "revolution" today, then President Hafez al-Assad claimed the events at Hama had been a large-scale foreign conspiracy, a view later vindicated since the Brotherhood had indeed received support from King Husayn of Jordan, the Israeli-backed Lebanese Maronite militia the Guardians of the Cedars, and from Saddam Hussein's Iraq; another important similarity to the current conflict being that these benefactors were all U.S. allies at the time (30, p. 336-7).

Syrian Self Determination and Foreign Weapons To Syria

There's a popular obsession by many on the Left with morally equating the flow of arms to both sides of this conflict, that is to argue the acquisition of weapons by the Syrian government is morally on par with the supply of weapons to the rebels. However the CPD takes it a step further by condemning the acquisition of weapons by the Syrian government, while supporting the acquisition of weapons by the rebels. Consider the following section:

"The fate of Syria must not be decided by foreign powers or forces, all with their own self-interested agendas. We condemn the support given to Assad by Russia, Iran, China and Hezbollah. Equally, we condemn the attempts by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf states to manipulate the Syrian revolution by promoting reactionary Islamist forces within its ranks."

If according to the CPD, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian support for the Syrian government constitutes a violation of their principle that "the fate of Syria must not be decided by foreign powers or forces", why haven't they applied the same standards to the rebels' benefactors? Instead they've merely criticised these Gulf states for "manipulating the Syrian revolution by promoting reactionary Islamist forces" as if the CPD would support Saudi and Qatari gun-running so long as their weapons ended up in the hands of the CPD's imaginary friends the "democratic rebels" with no strings attached. It's also hypocritical to argue that "the democratic opponents of the Assad dictatorship have the right to get guns where they can" while opposing the right of the Syrian government to acquire weapons.

Also the CPD shouldn't use the term "right" so loosely since it's a legal term that shouldn't be superficially employed to give the pretence of objectivity to cover up their own biases. However since the CPD seem so concerned with rights, they'd be interested to know that according to International Law (32) it's the flow of arms fuelling the Syrian insurgency that's illegal, whereas the Syrian government has every right to acquire foreign weaponry. Finally

this position, which morally equates the flow of arms to both sides, sets a dangerous precedent as far as imperialist-backed proxy wars are concerned since most nations, especially post-colonial nations like Syria, import nearly ALL their military equipment.

Does this mean post-colonial nations don't deserve to be defended when faced with an imperialist backed destabilisation campaign because they get their weapons from another country? By this logic, hypothetically, the CPD would find it impossible to oppose ANY imperialist proxy war against ANY post-colonial state since the influx of foreign weaponry to fuel an insurgency would be treated as morally on par with the imported weaponry of the nation's army.

Conclusion

In summary, the CPD makes it seem like the government is mowing down civilians en masse when all the actual evidence suggests that the majority of casualties are armed combatants; that government forces are conducting this war with caution; and that the rebels are responsible for the worst atrocities.

The CPD then peddles the myth of the "democratic rebels" most likely to divert attention away from the actual rebels, that is the ones who actually massacre Syrians on a sectarian basis, actually execute workers and throw their bodies off rooftops, actually bomb hospitals, and actually loot factories leaving tens of thousands without work. The CPD can feign concern all they like about "extremist Islamist militias" (i.e. the entire rebel camp) but these caveats appear entirely tokenistic and meaningless if the CPD are just going to support the "revolution" anyway.

The CPD claim to stand for "full democracy" despite cheering on reactionaries whose extremist designs stand opposed to the inclusive and secular identity globally recognised as emblematic of modern Syria. Perhaps as a ploy to encourage working class support for this proxy war, the CPD claims to stand for "an independent labor movement" without once considering what kind of revolution attracts the enthusiastic patronage of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, that is of nations where low paid workers are barred from forming unions and treated like slaves. Finally, the CPD claims to stand for the "complete equality for women, sexual minorities, religions and ethnic groups", but if they had even the most basic knowledge about Syria, they'd understand these are precisely the sections of Syrian society that are most terrified at the prospect of a rebel victory, and unlike the CPD, I wouldn't advise them to commit collective suicide by giving quarter to the reactionary rebels hell bent on destroying their nation. One can't help but invoke the term 'Orwellian' to describe the CPD, because far from campaigning for "peace and democracy", their position on Syria places them objectively on the same side as U.S. imperialism and their reactionary regional allies. The actual task of progressives, especially those based in the United States, should be to campaign against their government's imperialist designs, not encourage them.

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Notes

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