"Syria Solidarity UK" Supporting Al Qaeda and Denying Free Speech

By Prof. Tim Anderson
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Region: Europe, Middle East & North Africa
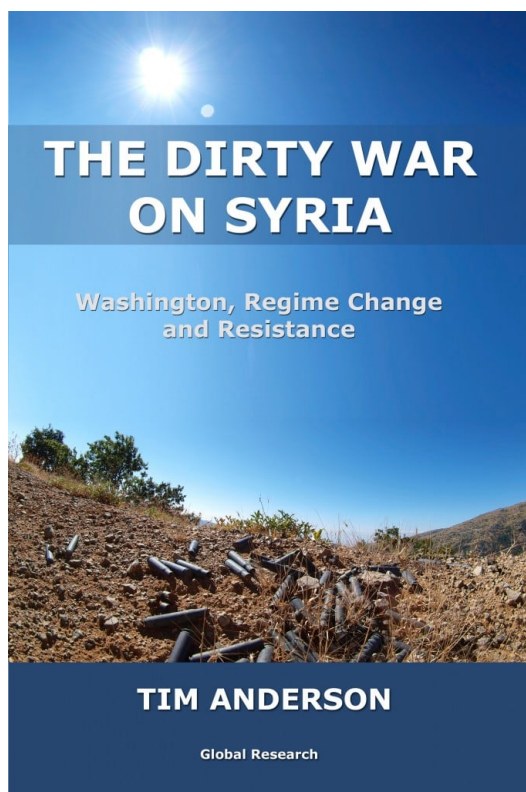Theme: Terrorism, US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: SYRIA

'Syria Solidarity UK' (SSUK), led by some British 'leftists', is strongly backing the US-led war on Syria and appears to support all the al Qaeda aligned armed groups. They use the pretence of concern for refugees while stoking a terrible war which drives those refugees.

Even after five years of proxy war, where it has become very clear that NATO states and the Gulf monarchies are using vicious extremist groups in an attempt to topple the Syrian Government, some small, deluded western 'left' groups still pretend this is a 'revolution'.

I first became aware of the SSUK very recently when they lobbied a Greek academic conference (Crossing Borders) to have me removed as an invited keynote speaker. I had been invited to present on the relationship between the war on Syria and the European refugee crisis, after interest in my recent book, *The Dirty War on Syria*.

THE DIRTY WAR ON SYRIA

Washington, Regime Change and Resistance

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The SSUK is very different to the Syria Solidarity Movement SSM, which opposes the war on Syria. When I looked closer at the SSUK I saw it had been created in 2014 by members of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and/or splinter groups formed over 2013-2014,

| 1

after a rape scandal within the SWP.

Spokesperson for the SSUK and SWP member Mark Boothroyd was joined by a number of his party comrades – including James Bloodworth, Razan Ghazzawi, Clay Claiborne, Kyle Orton and Paul Canning – in opposing my presentation at the conference. They had all backed the NATO bombing of Libya and now urge western arming of the al Qaeda linked groups and direct western intervention in Syria. I provide some detail of this below.

The SSUK split from the British Stop the War Coalition, which they criticised for 'opposing any UK military involvement' in Syria and for casting doubt on some of the claims against the Syrian Government, claiming (like the US Government) that Assad is 'worse than ISIS … that most Syrian refugees are fleeing Assad's violence' (SSUK 2015). The SSUK also criticises Stop the War UK for casting doubt on the 2013 East Ghouta chemical weapons incident, which the armed Islamist groups had falsely blamed the Syrian Army (see Anderson 2015).

Mark Boothroyd (2015), makes it very clear that the SSUK backs the armed opposition, called 'moderate rebels' by Washington and several European states. This includes the Saudi-backed Jaysh al Islam, the Turkish coalition Jaysh al Fatah (led by the banned Jabhat al Nusra) and Ahrar as Sham. That latter group was reported in May 2016 as having killed 150 civilians in a series of car bombings along the Syrian coast (FARS News 2016).

All of the above groups have worked hand in glove, for many years, with the banned terrorist group Jabhat al Nusra, while the SSUK Facebook site opposes Iraqi Government and Syrian Government bombing of ISIS strongholds in Raqqa and Fallujah. According to the British SSUK, Arab Governments cannot fight banned terrorist organisations in their own countries. This is much the same line as Washington.

Lesvos Refugee Camp

Invitation to "Crossing Borders" Conference

My invitation to the 'Crossing Borders' conference had come in February from a Greek academic:

GA: *"We are having a conference on the refugee crisis in Lesvos. Please consider coming as keynote speaker … Maybe if you could speak about Syria and what you describe in your book [that] would be interesting to the audience."*

I responded: *'The link between the wars of the New Middle East and the refugee crisis?'*

GA: *"Yes…exactly. That would be perfect since we want to give an anti-war tone to the conference. Just to be clear from the beginning CITS is only launching and so you will need to arrange expenses with your university."*

Three months later, after I had booked my flights to Greece, I received this message:

GA: *"Unfortunately there has been some very negative feedback about your participation … Some other speakers have threatened not to come."*

The conference committee had received a petition from the SSUK, signed by 66 people, then a series of emails. The committee caved in very quickly, after being emailed by the anti-Syrian group.

GA: *"They have connected your name with anti-left alliances [and] with for Assad people … many people from our list have been sending messages complaining and asking to be removed as speakers."*

Of course, it had always been clear that I supported the Syrian Government and opposed the war, based on the principle of self-determination for the Syrian people. More importantly, my book documented in detail the various myths created about the war.

It was an impressive achievement on the part of the SSUK to get 66 people to lobby the conference to remove one of its speakers. But why so much effort? Especially when the history of attempts to gag public speakers and ban books tend to attract much more attention. And why would any 'left' group so vehemently back yet another US-led Middle East war?

Who are the SSUK?

The SSUK (2016) proclaims its support for 'the popular revolution against the Assad regime'. Boothroyd (2015) says the group does not support the Kurdish YPG as they are *"not in conflict with the Assad regime, so don't constitute part of the armed rebellion."* He cites with approval the 'Free Syrian Army', Jaysh al Fatah, Ahrar as Sham and Jaysh al Islam – all groups the US, Turkey and the Saudis openly back.

SSUK social media sites link up to western front organisations like the Syria Campaign and the White Helmets', two of several 'human rights' front groups used to create 'propaganda storms' with distorted band fake information, helping escalate and prolong the war (Beeley 2016; Bartlett 2015).

The SSUK petition against me included Bissan Fakih, campaigner with The Syria Campaign,

and Rafif Jouejati, director of the US-based charity the 'FREE-Syria Foundation'. The latter was a spokesperson for the Local Coordinating Committees (LCC), which by late 2012 had aligned itself with the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) and Jabhat al Nusra. In 2013 Jouejati objected to the small scale of proposed US missile attacks on Syria, saying: "The LCC does not support a limited strike [on Syria]. As John Kerry said, this would be *'unbelievably small'*(Democracy Now 2013).

The petition included Australian Michael Karadjis, who has openly backed the official al Qaeda group in Syria, saying that 'despite the jihadist [Jabhat al] Nusra leadership, much of its ranks are decent revolutionaries' (Karadjis 2013). He also posted on his Facebook site his support for what would be an illegal and criminal Turkish-Saudi invasion of Syria:

> "I know this won't win points with 90% of my friends … but I would be in favour of a Turkish-Saudi action to drive Assad out. At very least it would be the lesser evil … I support providing the Free Syrian Army with massive supplies of anti-aircraft weaponry. I'm not sure how anyone can look at this and disagree. Short of that a regional action is, unfortunately, next best."

Michael Karadjis was joined on the petition by Australian freelance journalist Antony Loewenstein who, in turn, was joined by the pro-Israel British journalist Nick Cohen and British journalist and SWP member James Bloodworth. The latter backs western intervention in Syria and has demanded 'free speech' when his own SWP is under attack (Bloodworth 2014). They all wanted to block my views on the conflict and its implications for refugees.

Under banners of '*Protect civilians'* and '*Listen to Syrians'*, the SSUK FB site reproduces pro-ISIS propaganda. They cite with approval posts in 'Solidarity with the peoples of Fallujah and Raqqa', which complain about Iraqi, US, Kurdish, Iranian and Syrian attacks on ISIS in Raqqa and Fallujah, arguing: "Will Stop the War Coalition [UK] oppose the US-backed Iranian and Kurdish YPG blitzkriegs of Raqqa and Fallujah?" The SSUK links to a video from another British group which claims Iraqi Army attacks on ISIS in Fallujah represent "*the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis".*

Peter Tatchell, a British gay activist, was one of those who emailed the conference organisers. He is a person who, even after the disaster in Libya, called for a no-fly zone in Syria. He disingenuously claimed that his '*Don't bomb Syria … no bomb zone*' placard did not mean 'UK bombing of Syria'. But, after the NATO destruction of Libya, all intelligent people should understand what a 'no fly zone' means. Even conservative US academic reports, after the event, have demonstrated that more than ten times as many people died in Libya after the NATO intervention, on the 'no fly zone' pretext (Kuperman 2015).

Another signatory to the petition, British man Oz Katerji, supported the NATO 'no fly' intervention in Libya, and tries to justify it even after the disaster. He supports the armed groups in Syria. Further, he is a project coordinator for 'Help Refugees UK', and takes aid to the refugee flooded but Jabhat al Nusra-dominated town of Gaziantep in Turkey (Help Refugees UK 2016).

This highlights a dilemma with these '*humanitarian'* al Qaeda supporters. They proclaim political support for the al Qaeda groups then, in the name of helping refugees, deliver aid to camps controlled by those same internationally banned terrorist organisations. This is a short step away from providing material support to terrorist groups.

Dr Rola Hallam, another of the signatories on the petition to gag me, is a doctor involved with the UK-based NGO 'Hand in Hand for Syria' (HHS). She supports US military intervention in Syria. HHS, backed by the BBC, was exposed by British investigator Robert Stuart for fabricating evidence over an alleged Syrian attack on a Syrian school in August 2013. The aim was clearly to create a scandal which would attract western military intervention.

Building a catalogue of evidence, Robert Stuart (2016) found the BBC sequences of the alleged school attack, 'purporting to show the aftermath of an incendiary bomb attack ... are largely, if not entirely, staged.' Fabrications included the filmed commentaries from Dr Rola Hallam.

Amongst the other signatories on the SSUK petition were academic Thomas Pierret, who backed the NATO intervention in Libya and has since commented '*Why should we be scared of statelessness in Syria? Libya is so much better than Syria without a state*'. Razan Ghazzawi quotes with approval an article which says 'the Western left should reject knee-jerk anti-imperialism'. Kyle Orton (2015) argues 'NATO Was Right to Intervene in Libya'.

Similarly, Clay Clairborne regards the NATO-bombed catastrophe of Libya 'a revolutionary success story', arguing that Assad is behind al Qaeda (Clairborne 2015), even as the al Qaeda groups slaughter Syrian soldiers as well as civilians. Louis Proyect (2012), who calls himself 'The Unrepentant Marxist', attacks 'the Islamophobic left' for not supporting the campaigns to arm Islamist groups against Libya and Syria. He says he is 'inspired by' the Islamist attacks on Libya and Syria.

There is no extremist armed group in Syria that the SSUK and its allies have not backed, while they claim to support refugees that flee from war and the head choppers. Most displaced people within Syria seek refuge in government controlled areas, in Sweida, Damascus, Lattakia and Aleppo. They are clearly not 'fleeing Assad'.

The SSUK never uses the sort of detailed evidence that I have applied in my book, yet their online campaign seemed to carry more weight with the 'Crossing Borders' committee. I simply ask my academic colleagues: what is wrong with reasonable public debate?

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