

# Syria: Who Wants War, Who Wants Peace?

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*With the drums of war beating again in the Middle East, this time against Syria, it is important to ask ourselves: who is for and who is against this war?*

*Those who are against are pretty easy to identify: the countries directly concerned of course, Syria and Iran, but also the vast majority of the people of the world and their governments, the defenders of international law, specially Russia and China, but also, and that is somewhat new, most people in the West, and even part of their representatives. Given that, who could still be for the war?*

Well, regional actors, such as the Syrian rebels, Saudi Arabia or Turkey and the American and French governments. But what I will try to discuss here is what are the main reasons for part of the West to want war in the Middle East. Indeed, if we have to have a real dialogue of civilizations, one should understand who is against that dialogue. Is it the entire West, or their ruling classes, or something else?

The short answer is that what pushes us towards war is a combination of ideology and actions from pressure groups : the zionist-neoconservatives on the Right and the liberal interventionists on the Left.

To see what the first group does and wants, let us quote some recent headlines from the American and Israeli press.

According to the *Times of Israel*: “Israel intelligence seen as central to U.S. case against Syria.” [1] (Perhaps the fact that it is “central” also explains why it is so dubious [2].)

Then, in *Haaretz* [3] :

*“AIPAC to deploy hundreds of lobbyists to push for Syria action”. Or, in U.S. News and World Report [4]: “Pro-Israel lobby Seeks to Turn Tide on Syria Debate in Congress”. According to Bloomberg [5] : “Adelson New Obama Ally as Jewish Groups Back Syria Strike”. Even rabbis enter the dance: according to the Times of Israel [6], “U.S. rabbis urge Congress to back Obama on Syria”.*

The *New York Times* explained some of the logic behind the pressure:

*“Administration officials said the influential pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC was already at work pressing for military action against the government of Mr. Assad, fearing that if Syria escapes American retribution for its use of chemical weapons, Iran might be emboldened in the future to attack Israel. ... One administration official, who, like others, declined to be identified discussing White House strategy, called AIPAC ‘the 800-pound gorilla in the room,’ and said its allies in Congress had to be saying, ‘If the White*

*House is not capable of enforcing this red line' against the catastrophic use of chemical weapons, 'we're in trouble'."*

But one may reasonably ask what are the interests of Israel itself in inciting the United States to fight in Syria? Some observers claim that, since Bashar al Assad has allowed Israel to occupy Syrian territory on the Golan Heights and has kept the border quiet (without explaining what else he could have done, given the relationship of forces), conclude that Israel has no interest in toppling him. But what matters is that Assad is allied with Hezbollah and with Iran. Israel hates Hezbollah for its successful resistance to Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and sees Iran as the only potential challenge to Israeli military supremacy in the region.

Even so, it is not certain that Israel's war aim would be to overthrow Assad. A clue to Israel's intentions is provided by a September 5 article in the *New York Times* [7]:

*"Israeli officials have consistently made the case that enforcing Mr. Obama's narrow 'red line' on Syria is essential to halting the nuclear ambitions of Israel's archenemy, Iran. More quietly, Israelis have increasingly argued that the best outcome for Syria's two-and-a-half-year-old civil war, at least for the moment, is no outcome. For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad's government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis."*

*"This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don't want one to win — we'll settle for a tie," said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. "Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria."*

It is true that there are forces other than the Israel lobby pushing for war. Some neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia or Turkey also want to destroy Syria, for their own reasons. But they have nowhere near the political influence on the United States of the pro-Israel lobby. If Saudi princes use their money to try to corrupt a few U.S. politicians, that can easily be denounced as interference by a foreign power in the internal affairs of the United States. But no similar charge can be raised against Israeli influence because of the golden gag rule: any mention of such influence can be immediately denounced as a typical anti-Semitic slur against a supposedly nonexistent *"Jewish power"*.

Explaining war through a combination of ideology and the activities of pressure groups runs against the rather widespread belief, shared by much of the left, especially among people who think of themselves as Marxists (Marx himself was far more nuanced on this issue), that wars must be due to cynically rational calculations by capitalists. If this were so, these wars *"for oil"* might be seen as *"in the national interest"*. But this view sees *"capitalism"* as a unified actor issuing orders to obedient politicians on the basis of careful calculations. As Bertrand Russell put it, this putative rationality ignores *"the ocean of human folly upon which the fragile barque of human reason insecurely floats"*. Wars have been waged for all kinds of non-economic reasons, such as religion or revenge, or simply to display power.

People who think that capitalists want wars to make profits should spend time observing the board of directors of any big corporation: capitalists need stability, not chaos, and the recent wars only bring more chaos. American capitalists are making fortunes in China and Vietnam now that there is peace between the U.S. and those countries, which was not possible

during hostilities. As for the argument that they need wars to loot resources, one may observe that the U.S. is buying oil from Iraq now, and so does China, but China did not have to ruin itself in a costly war. Like Iraq, Iran or Syria are perfectly willing to sell their resources, and it is the political embargoes imposed by the U.S. that prevent such trade.

And how does one explain that many of the most determined opponents of war in the U.S. are found on the right of the political spectrum? Do the Tea Party, Ron Paul, Pat Buchanan, Justin Raimundo and antiwar.com, Paul Craig Roberts, among others, fail to see the wonderful profits to be made by capitalists in a devastated Syria?

The fact is that in the post-colonial period, wherever profits can be made through war, they can be made much more reliably in peaceful conditions, and most capitalists seem to have understood that.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the huge military-industrial complex benefits from wars. But the military-industrial complex benefits above all from various hyped-up threats of war, most notably the Soviet threat during the Cold War, which kept the credits and contracts flowing through the Pentagon. But long, botched wars such as in Afghanistan or Iraq tend to give war a bad name, are economically ruinous and lead to questioning the need for the huge U.S. military. The military-industrial complex doesn't need another such war in Syria. Moreover, many military officers are openly hostile to mounting an attack against Syria.

Perhaps because genuine, material or economic U.S. interests in going to war are so hard to find, the emphasis has shifted in the past decade to alleged *"moral"* concerns, such as *"the responsibility to protect"*, packaged with a catchy brand name, *"R2P"*. Today, the strongest advocates of going to war are the various humanitarian imperialists or liberal interventionists, who argue on the basis of R2P, or *"justice for victims"*, or alleged *"genocide prevention"*. This is another major ideological factor pushing us towards perpetual war.

There is a large overlap between humanitarian interventionism and support for Israel. In France Bernard Kouchner, who first invented and promoted the concept of the *"right to intervene"*, stated in a recent interview that *"Israel is like no other country. It is the result of the terrifying massacre of the Holocaust."* It is therefore *"our duty"* to protect it. Bernard-Henry Lévy prodded the French government to start the war against Libya, making no secret that he considered he was acting as a Jew for the interests of Israel; he is now the foremost and fiercest advocate of bombing Syria.

On September 6, the Cleveland Jewish News published a letter from *"leading rabbis"* urging Congress to support President Obama's plans to strike Syria. *"We write you as descendants of Holocaust survivors and refugees, whose ancestors were gassed to death in concentration camps,"* the letter said. By authorizing bombing raids, the rabbis said, *"Congress has the capacity to save thousands of lives"...*

Without such dramatization, obscuring the reality of each new crisis with images of the Holocaust, the whole notion that the best way to promote human rights and protect populations is to wage unilateral wars, destroy what is left of the international legal order and spread chaos would be seen for the absurdity it is.

Indeed, first of all, in a world with so much misery, if you want to spend public money to *"do good"*, then there is certainly something else to do than to spend hundreds of billions of

dollars building the huge U.S. military machine.

Next, one should never forget that intervening means intervening *militarily* and for that, one needs appropriate *military* means. The Europeans do not have those means and have no desire to spend enough money to acquire them. So in reality the message of the pro-intervention Europeans is: "*Please, oh Americans, make war not love!*" Better still, inasmuch as, since their debacle in Afghanistan and in Iraq, the Americans are leery of sending in ground troops, the message amounts to nothing other than asking the U.S. Air Force to go bomb countries where human rights violations are reported to be taking place.

Moreover, the political and military class that is supposed to save the populations "*massacred by their dictators*" is the same one that waged the Vietnam war, that imposed sanctions and wars on Iraq, that imposes arbitrary sanctions on Cuba, Iran and any other country that meets with their disfavor, that provides massive unquestioning support to Israel, which uses every means including coups d'état to oppose social reformers in Latin America, from Arbenz to Chavez by way of Allende, Goulart and others, and which shamelessly exploits workers and resources the world over. One must be quite starry-eyed to see in that political and military class the instrument of salvation of "*victims*", but that is in practice exactly what the pro-interventionists are advocating, because, given the relationship of forces in the world, there is no other military force than the U.S. able to impose its will.

Finally, what the interventionists forget is that, among non-Western countries, our supposedly benevolent intentions are not seen as such and they see our endless wars as hegemonic rather than humanitarian. Thus, we see counter-alliances developing, in Latin America, but also in Asia, Africa, Russia etc. The end of humanitarian interventions will be either total war or retreat.

The zionism/neoconservative ideology and the interventionist one are two aspects of the holocaust religion that has become the dominant religion in the West, at least among intellectuals. By speaking of holocaust religion, I do not mean to deny the event or to minimize its horror, but to question its relevance in political discussions today: whether one speaks of war and peace, of the European construction, of the nation-state or of immigration, or even freedom of expression, the holocaust is quickly mentioned in most discussions, but without rhyme or reason. One might equally well invoke the holocaust to justify peace and stability rather than humanitarian wars.

For now, the threat of war has been avoided, or at least "*postponed*". But let us not forget that Iraq and Libya also gave up their weapons of mass destruction, only to be attacked later. Syria is likely to abandon its chemical weapons, but without any guarantee that the rebels, much less Israel, won't retain such weapons. The popular mobilization against the war, probably the first one in history to stop a war before it starts, has been intense but may be short-lived. This must be an inspiration for continued efforts to make diplomacy prevail over bullying, and mutual disarmament over endless war. If people of the world really want peace, it can be achieved.

The viewpoints expressed here are shared by millions of people in the "*West*", who reject war as a means to settle international disputes. They adhere to the goals of the non-aligned movement of international cooperation within the strict respect for national sovereignty and equality of all peoples. They risk being denounced in the media of their own countries as being anti-Western, anti-American or anti-Semitic. Yet, they are the ones who, by opening

their minds to the aspirations of the rest of mankind, carry on what is genuinely of value in the Western humanist tradition.

Jean Bricmont, Rhodes, October 6, 2013

*Intervention at the Annual Session of the World Public Forum "Dialogue of Civilizations" held on the Greek island of Rhodes from the 2nd to the 6th of October 2013.*

#### Notes

[1] <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-intelligence-seen-as-central-to-us-case-against-syria/>

[2] For a discussion of the « evidence », see, for example, Gareth Porter: *How Intelligence Was to Support an Attack on Syria*, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/18559-how-intelligence-was-twisted-to-support-an-attack-on-syria>

[3] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.545661>

[4] <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/09/06/jewish-lobby-seeks-to-turn-tide-on-syria-debate-in-congress>

[5] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-09-04/adelson-new-obama-ally-as-jewish-groups-back-syria-strike.htm>

[6] <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-rabbis-urge-congress-to-back-obama-on-syria/>

[7] [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/world/middleeast/israel-backs-limited-strike-against-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/world/middleeast/israel-backs-limited-strike-against-syria.html?_r=0)

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