

Left- Horizons

No support for US-UK-France bombing of Syria

The threatening escalation of the war in Syria, by means of American, French and British air strikes, is a matter of grave concern to socialists everywhere. The Labour leadership must vigorously oppose Theresa May's stampede to support Donald Trump, who seems determined to exacerbate an already complex and bloody war in Syria.

Syria has been devastated in the last seven years; it is an arena for a series of interconnected and sometimes contradictory proxy wars, involving the armed forces of Russia, Turkey, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Israel, USA and the UK, as well as ISIS, Syrian Kurdish forces and the Syrian government itself. In many parts of Syria, armies are fighting over rubble and the wrecked remains of what used to be cities, towns and villages.

The losers in the conflict, and always the last consideration in the minds of international politicians (despite their pious rhetoric), are the terrorised civilian population of that country. The Syrian war has cost half a million civilian deaths and at least double that number of injured. From a pre-war population of around 22 million, more than 6 million are internally displaced and around five million are refugees outside of Syria, half of them in Europe. The United Nations estimates that as many as 13.5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Further bombing and intervention by US and British forces will do nothing, except prolong the agony for the mass of the Syrian population.

Socialists do not support the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad. He took over a personal dictatorship from his father, Hafez al-Assad, 'inheriting' a regime built on terror and state oppression. The father was no less vicious than the son is today, suppressing any opposition with the full force of a military-police state. In 1982, for example, an uprising in the town of Hama was crushed after an army siege of 27 days. Some reports put the number of deaths at as many as 20,000. Any socialist daring to be active in Syria today would be risking immediate imprisonment, with the possibility of torture or murder in one of Bashar al-Assad's many prisons.

Since coming to power, the Syrian Baath Party has based its power on the minority Alawite population, with a disproportionate number of them in key positions in the Baath Party, the armed forces and the state apparatus. It was no

surprise that when the 'Arab Spring' erupted in 2011, the majority Sunni population expressed an aspiration for greater freedom and opportunity. By ruthlessly suppressing the incipient Sunni opposition movement in 2011, Assad laid the basis for the rise of ISIS a few years later.

Assad is winning on the ground

In the last two years, Assad has been winning the war against ISIS, thanks largely to military support from Russia and Iran, backed on the ground by the Shiite Lebanese Hezbollah militia. Both Russia and Iran have supported Syria only as a means of enhancing their own military-strategic influence in the region. The increasing influence of Iran (in Iraq too) and its support for Hezbollah, has also drawn Israel into the war. In the last few years, Israel has made over a hundred air raids aimed at Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria.

Another important component in wearing down the ISIS military machine has been the intervention of Syrian Kurdish militias, backed to some degree by the US military. But adding a further complication to the war, the success of the Kurdish militia is bitterly resented by the Turkish government to the north. Turkey has therefore been drawn into the conflict, invading and occupying parts of northern Syria, for fear that an autonomous – and armed – Kurdish enclave in Syria would ignite the national aspirations of Kurds living in Turkey. Last but not least, and largely hidden from any media attention, American and British 'special forces' are on the ground in Syria, working with armed groups that are fighting against Assad's regime or against ISIS.

But as much as socialists must oppose the brutal regime of al-Assad, we can give no support whatsoever to a US, French and British bombing campaign, which now looks increasingly likely. America is still the world's greatest military super-power, with a capability greater than the next three or four states put together. Nor is it just a question of the *number* of planes and warships; the American military is *technologically* far superior to its global rivals. Trump's boasts, therefore, about 'new' and 'smart' missiles are not entirely empty. The US military capability is more than a match for both the Syrian and Russian forces in the region.

But the irony is that this huge US military advantage masks a long and inglorious decline in the political and strategic influence of the USA in this part of the world. Six years after Obama declared that “Assad has to go”, the Syrian president is in a stronger position than ever before and he will not be weakened one jot by more American missiles. As Edward Luce wrote in the *Financial Times*, “If you want a glimpse of a post-American world, look at Syria.”

Trump’s prime consideration – and we might also add, that of Macron and Theresa May – is *domestic* politics. In ordering new missile strikes in Syria, they are pushing the right buttons for their political support at home.

The Immediate pretext for airstrikes is the alleged use of poison gas against the population of *Douma* by the Syrian government last week. But this, in reality is only a *pretext*. The US and British governments will never let any facts stand in the way of a good story. A year ago, in an identical narrative, an alleged poison gas attack at *Khan Sheikhoun* was the pretext for a missile attack on a Syrian air base. But now, according to the American *Newsweek* magazine, the US Secretary of Defence, Mattis, has admitted that there is no evidence that Syria was responsible for that gas attack.

According to the *Newsweek* correspondent, a White House Memorandum on that attack “seemed to rely heavily on testimony from the Syrian White Helmets who were filmed at the scene having contact with supposed Sarin-tainted casualties and not suffering any ill effects”. (*Newsweek*, February 8, 2018). Other journalists, a little less ‘embedded’ in British and American government propaganda machines, have pointed out that ISIS itself has a track-record of using gas. It has also been pointed out, by Peter Ford, the former British ambassador to Syria no less, (on BBC Radio and TV) that the Syrian regime has no incentive to use poison gas when it was winning the war on the ground and the use of gas was only likely to provoke the reaction that it has. He further pointed out that the main evidence for the gas attack has come from *jihadi* groups who have beheaded and burnt prisoners to death.

Of course, it is possible that the Syrian government *did* use poison on the residents of Douma last week. They are certainly capable of doing it. But we also know that the British and American governments are capable, where no evidence exists, of *manufacturing* it. After all, the invasion of Iraq by US and Britain in 2003 was based on a mountain of lies. We all remember Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, speaking in the United Nations about Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction.” We remember, too, Tony Blair telling the British House of Commons that Iraqi missiles could reach London in 40 minutes.

War in Iraq launched on mountain of lies

That war cost millions in lost Iraqi lives and injuries. Untold damage was done to the Iraqi infrastructure and economy, damage from which it will take decades to recover. Hundreds of American and British service personnel gave their lives. And for

what? For *lies*. For oil, and for the hundreds of billions of dollars of profits for the military-industrial complex. Iraq was so shattered by the 2003 invasion and its new ‘constitution’ so rigged along rigid sectarian lines, that this country too, like Syria after 2011, was a fertile ground for the rise of ISIS within its Sunni population.

We take no lessons in righteous indignation, therefore, from Theresa May and Donald Trump over the deaths of civilians in Douma. We cannot help noticing that there has been no righteous indignation over the persistent bombing of civilians in Yemen by the Saudis, with arms and logistical support provided by the West. Neither has there been any government or media outrage about Israel deploying snipers, to fire live rounds at unarmed Palestinians in Gaza.

Although a new American missile attack on Syria now seem inevitable, it is not likely that it will lead to a generalised conflict and certainly not to a major military conflict between the USA and Russia. Despite all the Twitter bellicosity of Trump, echoed by comments of Russian officials from time to time, a US strike will not trigger a war between the super-powers. It is likely that the missile attack on Syria will be limited. The USA has the capability of completely wiping out the Syrian air force. Even the Israelis – a small state in terms of population, but a regional military super-power – could eliminate the Syrian air-force in a day. But this scenario is not likely to happen, because, despite its military superiority, the USA does not want to push the Russians into such a tight corner that they will be obliged to rearm Syria – as they would – with even more modern aircraft and weapons.

For their part, the Russians can see that their influence and prestige in the region are on the rise, corresponding those of the US, which are on the wane. Russia has no reason to provoke a major military confrontation with the USA at present and they will quietly move their planes and ships out of harm’s way until the immediate crisis is over. They are content, instead, to play the long game and be a minor irritant in the short term.

Having said all that, we live in a period of unprecedented social and political upheaval, and the dominant characteristic of the age is *volatility*. A major conflagration may be very unlikely, but it can never be completely ruled out that an unexpected combination of ‘accidental’ factors – not least the unpredictability of the loose cannon who occupies the White House – may trigger a conflict on a much wider scale than either side originally anticipated.

Labour must strenuously oppose the Tories’ rush to war in Syria. Bombing Assad’s air-bases will inevitably result in even more civilian ‘collateral’ deaths so it will do absolutely *nothing* to help the civilian population of Syria or undermine al-Assad. More bombs and missile attacks will only prolong the agony of the Syrian population. The Labour Party should demand that if the British Government does anything in Syria, it should be sending boatloads of humanitarian aid and making good on its empty promise to take child refugees.

April 13, 2018