RESOLUTION ON SYRIA

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The general line of this resolution is being presented for a vote at the 2018 Socialist Action convention.

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I. Framing the discussion

A brief summary of the situation in Syria

The Syrian war is quite possibly the worst human disaster of the new millennium. The scale of death and destruction—with entire cities laid waste—is staggering. Most sources agree that the number of deaths is in the neighborhood of half a million, close to five times the number who were killed in the war in neighboring Iraq. About one-third of the dead are civilians, of whom the overwhelming majority were killed by Syrian government forces and their foreign allies—not only Iranian and Russian forces but often mercenaries from Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere. The World Bank estimated in June 2017 that one-third of all buildings in the country, and half of its hospitals and schools, had been damaged or destroyed.

At least 5.6 million people (over a quarter of the pre-war population) have fled Syria because of the war, while around 6.6 million are displaced within the country, according to United Nations records. Put another way, over half of the pre-war population of the country have been uprooted from their homes. This is the largest refugee crisis of our time.

The war in Syria began as a popular struggle against the authoritarian, “crony-capitalist” regime of Bashar Assad. In February 2011, groups of young activists, inspired by the Arab Spring, issued a call for a Day of Rage. The response was light, but one month later, after several teenagers in the city of Daraa were arrested and tortured for writing anti-regime graffiti on a wall, the mass protest movement took off. We will provide more analysis of the conditions that led to the struggle later in this document. At the outset, here is a brief summary of some of the major aspects of the war:

In the summer of 2011, following a period of several months in which peaceful protests demanding economic and social reforms had been brutally attacked by government security forces, hundreds had been killed, and thousands had been arrested or “disappeared,” the call for Assad to leave office became widespread. For the next year, popular demonstrations continued in hundreds of towns and cities and even increased in frequency. However, as government troops, police, and fascist-like shabeeha goon squads continued to ramp up the level of repression, the need for self-defense changed the general nature of the struggle. Some protesters began to arm themselves, and home-grown local militias made their appearance.

After a short while, over 1000 militias were in the fray. Some were mainly secular in orientation, while others professed allegiance to various forms of Islamic belief. Many became affiliated to the loose amalgamation called the Free Syrian Army, but centralized leadership and coordination were lacking, and weapons were also in short supply. Deserters from Assad’s Syrian Arab Army also swelled the ranks of the FSA; many of them switched sides after being ordered by their officers to fire on civilian populations. The FSA claimed at one point that about 189,000 of its soldiers were deserters from the government ranks (around 61 percent of the 300,000-man Free Syrian Army in 2011).

At the same time, the Syrian National Council and its successor, the Syrian National Coalition—a generally bourgeois and petty-bourgeois “leadership” composed mainly of individuals in exile, many of whom were close to the Muslim Brotherhood—were recognized and promoted by the United States and other countries, but had limited practical authority in the struggle inside Syria.

For the first year or more into the war, it appears that the FSA and other anti-Assad militias captured most of their weapons (mainly small arms) from enemy stocks or purchased them on the black market. In time, however, funds and weapons came into Syria from wealthy Gulf State benefactors, from Syrians living abroad, and from other countries,
chiefly Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This helped to place major portions of the anti-Assad movement under the sway of the better-armed conservative Islamic militias. Some militia brigades, although mainly secular or non-denominational in their orientation, were redubbed with names of figures from Islamic theological history. A brigade named “Che Guevara” would not have been likely to obtain funding from conservative sources in the Gulf, observes a Syrian cited in the excellent book “Burning Country,” by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila A-Shami (Pluto Press 2016).

In time, the influx of Islamist militants from abroad—many coming through Turkey (the forces that eventually became the Islamic State [ISIS] came initially from Iraq)—also had a major effect in changing the nature of the anti-Assad struggle in many areas.

In the meantime, the Syrian government’s assault on the protests had proceeded through three quick initial phases. As Yassin al-Haj Saleh describes it in “The Impossible Revolution” (Haymarket 2017), from March through early August 2011, the regime approached the protests mainly as a grave security matter. Afterwards, until early February 2012, it switched to launching full-blown military operations against it. February 2012, he states, marked the transition to a phase of “outright terrorism and a scorched-earth policy, of mass murders and the destruction of neighbourhoods and towns, especially in Homs, Idlib, Hama, and certain areas of Damascus.”

But after meeting concerted armed resistance, the Assad regime found that its military resources were being stretched thin. It withdrew from vast sections of the country, chiefly in the north, the east, and the far south. In its wake, oppositional militias moved in and alternative town and village administrations were set up. The Assadists concentrated on trying to reclaim and secure individual cities in the fertile and more populated western section of the country—what was considered “useful Syria,” in the old parlance of the French colonialists. This was done at a terrible cost. Homs, for example, one of the main centers of the early protests, was almost razed by Assadist bombing and artillery—with thousands of deaths and some 30,000 civilians dislocated from their homes. Yet the center of Homs was not occupied by the Assad forces until May 2014, and the entire city was not captured until May 2017.

In fact, for the first four years of the war, the demoralized Syrian Arab Army, even with far superior firepower, struggled to hold territory. The conscripted soldiers in Assad’s army often balked at joining the fight against fellow citizens. Draft-dodging was common, with parents in many communities protesting and blockading streets to ward off the military recruiters. The Syrian government army was estimated to have declined from 300,000 at the start of the war to barely 100,000 a few years later.

After a series of government setbacks in 2012 and 2013, Iran and the associated Hizbollah and Shi’ite militias (from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc.) sent additional weapons and troops, but it wasn’t enough to quell the popular rebellion. However, rebel militias were also held back by deficiencies in weaponry and organization. By the end of 2013, the fighting appeared to be approaching stalemated; opposition forces, for example, took control of the eastern, working-class sections of Aleppo, but their troops lacked enough ammunition to try to occupy the entire city. Around that time, reactionary Islamist militias—primarily al-Nusra and the even more brutal Islamic State—had established a base and started to move toward center stage in the war.

By mid-2015, the regime had once again lost a lot of ground; many commentators in the Western media speculated that Assad would soon be compelled to step down. However, the introduction of Russian airpower at the end of September 2015 allowed the Assadist forces to resume the initiative. The Russians entered the war with the pledge that their forces would be used to repel ISIS and other “terrorists.” In reality, Russian airpower was very rarely used against ISIS. But it did allow Assad’s military to significantly step up their ability
to bomb and lay siege to towns and cities that had joined the revolt and eventually to recapture them. Relentless bombardments of civilian populations, and making use of insidious weapons such as cluster bombs and barrel bombs, brought the war to a new level of destruction and human misery.

From that time to the present, the major axis of the war centered on the increasingly successful drive by the Syrian government—often with Iranian, Hezbollah, or Russian forces leading the way and doing the brunt of the fighting—to capture territory that was under oppositional administration. The rebel militias, conversely, were pushed back almost entirely into a defensive posture.

In the meantime, several less prominent conflicts were taking place. Of these, the major one was the battle of the U.S.-supported and Kurdish PYD-led Syrian Democratic Force against ISIS in the eastern section of the country. Syrian, Iranian, and Russian forces also took action against ISIS, although much less so, and very late in the game.

**The current picture**

This past year (2018) saw two major Syrian government offensives, aided by Russian bombing. Large opposition-held portions of Eastern Ghouta (near Damascus) and the area around Daraa in the south were retaken—resulting in a huge spike in civilian deaths and tens of thousands of people displaced from their homes and villages. Most of the country is now in the hands of the Damascus government and its Russian and Iranian allies.

The area of Syria governed by anti-Assad popular organizations and militias has shrunk to little more than what exists in the northern province of Idlib. With a population generally estimated at close to 3 million, Idlib is swollen with refugees from other areas of the country. (The Assadist and Russian military frequently arranged a “deal” with insurgent fighters and their sympathizers who were under siege to transport them to a safe haven in Idlib.) The Idlib countryside is filled with overcrowded shelters and tent cities. Much of the food production of this once rich agricultural area, already damaged by drought and mismanagement by the government, was further destroyed by the war. Despite aid coming in from Turkey, there is a short supply of food and medicine.

According to recent reports, local committees with popular support and allegiance to the goals of the original democratic upsurge against Assad still hold on in the province. Around 150 of these councils were in operation, at least until recently, according to data cited by Leila Al-Shami (author of “Syria: Burning Country”) in her blog. The Free Syrian Army operates there, but its affiliated militias are relatively weak and fragmented. Conservative Islamist militias, including the former al-Nusra—once affiliated with al-Qaeda and now expanded into a front called Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—have made continual gains despite community resistance against them, and they now apparently control areas containing a majority of the population.

As I write this, eastern areas of Idlib have been bombed by Russian warplanes and Syrian helicopters. Many sources report that Syrian troops and armored units are massing on the edge of Idlib, and it increasingly appears that a full-scale attack by Assad’s forces and their allies is imminent. This could lead to a bloodbath; as yet there is no clear path for refugees to flee the fighting.

The situation has been complicated by reports that the Kurdish PYD has been discussing working with Assadist troops to “take back” Idlib, in exchange for the Syrian government’s awarding Afrin and Manbij to Kurdish administration. At the same time, Turkey has observation posts in the border region of northern Idlib and in Afrin; it supports some FSA units that, together with several Islamist militias, are part of the new “National Liberation Front” in Idlib. Turkey has been in discussions with Russia about perspectives for this
region. This could lead to some sort of de-escalation agreement in Idlib that would forestall the worst effects of a Syrian government assault. This would be to Turkey's advantage in eliminating another rush of refugees striving to cross its territory; Turkey also hopes that a settlement might keep the Kurds from getting involved more closely along its border.

Close to a quarter of Syria, in the northeast, is generally under Kurdish administration—and receives U.S. aid and “protection.” Aside from a handful of minor skirmishes, the PYD maintained a détente with the Assad regime during the war and even fought against FSA and other rebel units on occasion. Today, the Kurds have working agreements with the Damascus government and with the Russians for operation and profit-sharing in some of the oil fields in the region. Moreover, the PYD has entered negotiations with the Syrian regime toward establishing its participation in a post-war federal state. At the same time, however, the United States has based over 2000 troops and "special forces" there and is reportedly constructing an airfield near Raqqा.

Some of the country that was destroyed and recaptured by Assadist troops is very slowly rebuilding. War profiteers have been buying up land and seeking construction contracts; foreign companies are sniffing around for ways to enter the Syrian market. But towns and cities have been depopulated, and it is likely that thousands—perhaps millions—of people who fled or lost their homes to bombing will never reclaim their property.

Law No. 63, from 2012, empowers the Ministry of Finance to seize property belonging to people who fall under the counter-terrorism law (Law No. 19 of 2012). Others who might wish to return to their homes face retaliation and prosecution by Syrian government authorities for participating in, or being sympathetic to, the anti-Assad resistance. In Eastern Ghouta and Daraa provinces, conquered by Assad's forces earlier this year, arrests have already taken place of people who are perceived to have been political opponents.

Law No. 10, passed this year, authorizes the formation of new local administrative units that allow for the confiscation of property by the state, without compensation, if the owner fails to prove their ownership within a year. This will be very difficult for displaced residents—especially those now living in refugee camps in other countries. Many people had no property deeds in the first place, or lost them with their other belongings during the war. The Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that 70% of refugees lack basic identification documents.

There are indications that property left behind by Sunnis could be redistributed to regime loyalists and Shi’ite militia members. And Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities have already seen large neighborhoods of workers' housing (formerly held by oppositional forces and damaged in the war) bulldozed. Published plans show these redeveloped districts occupied by skyscrapers, shopping malls, and restaurants for the new bourgeoisie.

Obviously, the Syrian government lacks the resources to rebuild the country on its own. It appears likely that the economic and political future of Syria will be molded to a significant degree through the agency of the major countries that have intervened into the war—Russia and Iran in the first place, and also Turkey. The United States is a possible contender in the eastern part of the country, though Trump has spoken vaguely about withdrawing U.S. troops from the area, and recently made overtures to the Syrian regime. The Trump administration has also backed away from demands that “Assad must step down”; it appears reconciled to the continuance of the regime and is prepared to do business with it. However, Trump has raised strong objections to the continued presence of Iranian forces in Syria, and has so far unsuccessfully tried to convince Russia to pressure Iran to leave.

On Sept. 3, the White House sent out a tweet begging Assad, the Russians, and the Iranians not to mount a “reckless” assault on Idlib. The Trump administration cited humanitarian grounds for its concern, although the U.S. was never very worried about the civilian casualties that occurred in its own assaults on Raqqা, Mosul, and Tikrit. And despite the
crocodile tears for Idlib, the U.S. has made clear that it will stand away from whatever happens there, just as it did when Assad and the Russians took Daraa in the south.

A digest of U.S. intervention into Syria

Syria’s foreign policy during the last several decades has caused the United States to view it as a natural foe. Its support (although it was inconsistent) for the Palestinian cause against Israel, its closeness to Iran and to Hezbollah in Lebanon, its collaboration with forces fighting against the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the fact that it has permitted Russia to operate a naval base on its coast have all been seen by the U.S. as counter to its interests. However, U.S. actions against Syria tended to oscillate through the years between outright belligerence and what the State Department calls “engagement”—i.e., the “carrot or the stick.” Knowing that the Assad regime tends to be very pragmatic and inconsistent in its foreign policy has often caused U.S. officials to believe that the regime would be pliable and that they could tilt it toward U.S. interests; at these times, relations sometimes warmed up considerably. However, the general underlying attitude toward the Assad regime has been one of distrust.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States had few serious challenges to its position as the leading world power. The removal of the USSR as an adversary smoothed the way toward making war on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1991 by a U.S.-led coalition. And the Gulf War victory in turn seemed to solidify U.S. dominance in the
Middle East. The haughtiness of the United States grew under the George W. Bush administration, as it manufactured a second war against Iraq in 2003.

In the early years of the Bush administration, Syria was courted by Washington as a possible ally in the Middle East. After the 9/11 tragedy, captured Islamic “terrorists” were “renditioned” by the Americans to prison in Syria, with the knowledge that Assad’s torturers could extract information using methods that the U.S. could claim it had kept its hands clean of—at least for the record.

One example involved Haydar Zammar, an alleged al-Qaeda recruiter, who was arrested in Morocco in October 2001 and rendered by the CIA to Syria. “US officials in Damascus submit written questions to the Syrians, who relayed Zammar’s answers back,” Time magazine reported in July 2002. “State Department officials like the arrangement because it insulates the US government from any torture the Syrians may be applying to Zammar.”

But even before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as the post-9/11 United States embarked on a worldwide “War Against Terrorism,” Syria had good reason to fear that it too was on the U.S. hit list, as a country that supposedly was harboring terrorists. Syria was added to the administration’s so-called “Axis of Evil” by U.S. Secretary of State John Bolton.

In 2002, a Syria Accountability Act was proposed in Congress. Democrats as well as Republicans enthusiastically climbed onto the pro-war bandwagon. The co-sponsor of the SAA, Eliot Engel (Democrat-N.Y.) told Congress, “We will not tolerate Syrian support for terrorism. We will not tolerate Syrian occupation of Lebanon. … I do not want to witness horrors worse than 9/11. I urge the administration to get tough on Syria.” His Democratic Party colleague from New York, Gary Ackerman, piped up, “Syria is a small, decrepit, little terror state that has been yanking our chain for years.”

After the U.S. invaded Iraq, Syria was seen by many U.S. officials as next on the list of countries to undergo U.S.-engineered regime change. Particularly galling to the United States was the fact that Assad, fearing the establishment of a U.S. bastion in neighboring Iraq, had opened Syria’s borders to radical Islamists to travel to Iraq to fight against the U.S. occupation.

On Dec. 12, 2003, George W. Bush signed the SAA, which banned all trade with Syria except food and medicine, demanding both “an end to its illegal shipments of weapons and other military items to Iraq” and “an end to its occupation of Lebanon.” After the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, an act that many attributed to Syrian agents, Bush withdrew his ambassador from Damascus and urged other countries to diplomatically boycott Syria, while escalating the demand that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon. That year, several clashes were reported on the Syria-Iraq border between U.S. and Syrian soldiers.

Despite the pressure, Assad kept a hand in the Iraq war. Two years later, in April 2007, General David Petraeus, who had recently been appointed commander of the U.S.-led multinational forces in Iraq, stated that “80 to 90 percent of the suicide attacks are carried out by foreigners” channeled into Iraq by a “network that typically brings them through Syria.”

Nevertheless, within another year, relations began to warm up between Syria and the U.S. This was facilitated by the fact that Syria had established a mutual security pact with the Iraqi government in 2006. As the situation continued to deteriorate for the United States in Iraq, the U.S. government spoke with the Assad regime about methods to stabilize the situation there.

The United States found it had reached too far in Iraq. Both Iraq wars—and especially the second one—had whipped up a cauldron of competing forces that undermined U.S. attempts to establish its “hegemony” over the region:
• In the aftermath of the Gulf War, strong violence broke out between Sunnis and Shi’ites in Iraq. In general, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had favored Sunni Arabs at the expense of Shi’ites, who were the majority in the country. Many Shia leaders took refuge in Iran, and established contacts with the leadership of the Islamic Republic. When these Shia leaders returned to Iraq after the 2003 war, they dominated the new government and instituted a strong alliance with Iran.

• The Iran-Iraq alliance (which helped to establish a land corridor through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon) caused a reaction from the Saudi monarchy, which dreaded the rise of Iranian political and economic power in the region; they also feared that the oppressed Shi’ite minority in Saudi Arabia itself might be stirred into rebellion. This furthered Saudi aggressiveness in the region—providing aid to anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon, etc.

• Also, portions of the Sunni population in Iraq, including former military officers and officials from the ousted Ba’athist regime, took armed action against the Shi’ite-dominated government, which fed into the rise of ISIS.

• And finally, the Turkish government was riled by the establishment of a Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq, and beefed up its military operations on the border.

The continuing insurgency in Iraq, together with factors such as the world financial crisis and the rise of antiwar sentiment in the United States, caused the incoming Obama administration to draw back from the adventurism of the Bush years in regard to the Middle East—at least, initially. And tensions eased still further between the U.S. and Syria. Syria withdrew its support from the radical Islamist networks that it had helped to infiltrate into Iraq, and it imprisoned a number of Islamic militants.

The barriers of international isolation that had surrounded Syria quickly began to crumble. Assad was invited to a conference of European-Mediterranean cooperation hosted by France in 2008. Diplomats and trade delegations visited Damascus. Obama renewed formal relations and appointed an ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford. As late as February 2011—just as the first small protest demonstrations were taking place in Damascus—Senator John Kerry was involved in trying to restart Syrian-Israeli negotiations. From time to time Kerry and his wife were dinner guests of Bashar and Asma Assad in Damascus.

Obviously, the U.S. and international capitalism were pleased by Assad’s neoliberal economic reforms. Although people were protesting police brutality in the streets of Damascus, and raising placards that read, "Yes to Freedom," such topics were rarely mentioned in polite diplomatic circles.

Even after Assadist troops and snipers began to shoot protesters, and the demonstrations became massive, the response in Washington and other Western capitals remained tepid. Events in Egypt and the military campaign in Libya took precedence. On March 27, Hillary Clinton famously assured a CBS television reporter: "Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he [Assad] is a reformer." A month later, Obama was a bit stronger, however, urging Assad to “change course now.”

Only on August, after the theme of the protests had shifted to demanding that Assad leave power, did Obama change his tone, announcing: "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

Putting teeth into the pronouncement, the U.S. ordered a boycott of Syrian oil. There is no evidence, however, that Obama had much intention of following up the statement with military action; the U.S. was still occupied in Libya at the time. Why did Obama speak
against Assad at that moment? Some commentators point to the fact that the administration had lost face in the Middle East by its prolonged support for Mubarak in Egypt when he was besieged by protesters and its delay in showing enthusiasm for the Arab Spring. Now, the Obama administration judged that Assad’s days as head of state would soon be over; it did not want to make the mistake once again of not declaring itself soon enough with the winners.

By intervening, the U.S. hoped to keep a lid on the direction of the protests; maintaining support for the protests could help to moderate them and avoid a more radical outcome—which Assad’s violence seemed likely to provoke. And on the other hand, if a new government were to take power in Damascus, the U.S. wanted to be right in position to reap future business and diplomatic rewards.

On Feb. 6, 2012, Obama said confidently that Assad’s fall “is not going to be a matter of if; it’s going to be a matter of when” (cited in “Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad,” by David W. Lesch, Yale University Press 2013). But the U.S. calculated poorly in regard to the amount of support that Assad could count on. Unlike in Egypt, for example, the top echelon of the military stayed loyal. The phase of street protests rapidly evolved into full-scale war, and in less than a year, the U.S. began to involve itself in the military action.

Hillary Clinton put the situation very delicately in her memoir, “Hard Choices,” when writing of the arrangement as she supposedly understood it in early 2012: “Certain countries would increase their efforts to funnel arms [to the rebels], while others [i.e., the U.S.] would focus on humanitarian aid” (quoted in Phillips, “The Battle for Syria”).

In reality, beginning in 2012, the CIA had a hand in clandestinely funneling arms across the Turkish border to Syrian rebels. In July of that year, Clinton said in “Hard Choices,” she developed a plan with CIA director Petraeus to train and equip a force of “moderate” rebels who “could be trusted with American weapons” (cited in “The Battle for Syria” by Christopher Phillips, Yale University Press).

In a more up-front capacity, in February 2013, the U.S. started giving medical supplies and other non-lethal aid to the insurgents.

Then in rapid fashion, in accord with Obama’s authorization of April 2013, supplying arms to the rebel groups became official. Why did the U.S. involve itself militarily? For one thing, from the U.S. point of view, the stakes had gone up—additional international forces were participating in the conflict. Iran and its ally, Hezbollah, gave Assad a major boost, which caused the major U.S. ally in the Arab world and arch-competitor to Iran, Saudi Arabia, to increase its aid to the anti-Assad side. U.S. ambassador Robert Ford later remarked, “We did not anticipate that Hezbollah would go in in such a big way in 2013. We thought we’d get to negotiations by summer 2013 because the regime would be on its back heels, we did not see Hezbollah coming at all” (quoted in Phillips, “The Battle for Syria”).

The U.S. could not stand by if it insisted on remaining a player; but it still dallied. Even if President Obama from time to time said, “Assad needs to step down,” his administration held back from taking sufficient action to overthrow Assad outright by military force. With wars raging in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, the U.S. realized that becoming bogged down in Syria could be costly. In addition, it had little confidence in the scattered FSA militias, and feared blowback if arms should get into the hands of Islamist groupings, over which it had far less control.

In 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed the dilemma that U.S. warmakers faced as she argued against politicians who wanted more military aid to be sent to Syria: “What are we going to arm them with and against what? We’re not going to bring tanks over the borders of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. We know al-Qaeda is supporting the opposition in Syria. Are we supporting al-Qaeda in Syria? Hamas is now supporting the opposition. Are we supporting Hamas in Syria? If you’re a military planner or if you’re secretary of state and
you’re trying to figure out do you have the elements of an opposition that is actually viable, that we don’t see” (quoted in Lesch, “Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad”).

Accordingly, U.S. participation in military action against Assad was limited and sporadic—mainly calculated, as Obama made clear on many occasions, as a lever to bring Assad to the negotiations table. A less publicized hope was that sections of the regime would eventually bow to the pressure and eject Assad (perhaps in a coup). Several times, the U.S. entertained negotiated deals with Russia and other governments to allow Assad to stay at least until future elections could be organized.

For several years, the CIA continued to work with Saudi Arabian operatives to ferry thousands of small weapons over the Turkish border, destined for selected “moderate” rebel militias. The program was costly but had little effect in building up a well-organized military opposition that could force Assad’s army to ease its attacks—let alone seriously threaten the seat of power in Damascus. Soon, U.S. aid to rebel militias dribbled down to practically nothing. In fact, the U.S. program acted to restrict the types of arms that the rebels could acquire, preventing their acquisition of anti-aircraft missiles and other heavy weaponry. After much debate in Washington, the CIA was authorized to supply some rebels with TOW anti-tank missiles from stocks held by Saudi Arabia—and the missiles did seem to have helped militias that received them to make temporary gains against the Assad forces.

On the other hand, the CIA’s attempts to train militia members in the fight against Assad were completely ineffectual. The CIA states that it spent billions on the training project, based mainly in Jordan, but it encountered one failure after another. After a while, the few trainees who made it over the border into Syria were directed into the war against the Islamic State and instructed not to fight Assad’s forces. After 2014, the U.S. turned its attention almost exclusively to the fight against ISIS.

**Socialist Action’s early analysis**

Socialist Action tried to follow developments in Syria as closely as possible during the first years of the revolt and civil war, as news reports came trickling in. Our analysis was rooted in the historic program and principles of the revolutionary socialist movement. Those principles include the right of oppressed nations to self-determination (as against imperialist intervention) and Trotsky's thesis of Permanent Revolution, which underscores the need and ability of the oppressed masses of underdeveloped countries, under the organized leadership of the working class, to transcend the limitations of bourgeois society and to make a socialist revolution. Trotsky’s thesis points out that fundamental economic and democratic gains for the oppressed (such as full national liberation) can only be achieved with the overthrow of capitalism.

The revolutionary principles that underpin our analysis were fully reflected two years into the war, when in September 2013 we wrote a succinct editorial outlining Socialist Action’s position on Syria. In my opinion, the essentials of our 2013 position, though requiring updating, remain accurate even today.

We wrote at the time: “Socialist Action stands squarely opposed to all U.S. intervention in Syria while simultaneously supporting the right of the people of Syria to self-determination. Socialist Action was among the first to hail the massive and repeated popular and peaceful uprisings that challenged the dictatorial regime and neoliberal economic policies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. These mobilizations were regularly met with brute military force.

“Today these forces, organized largely in Local Coordinating Committees that provide a modicum of defense and significant vital social services to Syria’s beleaguered people, if
they prove capable of sinking deep roots into the entire population, can become central to any working-class challenge to Assad's power, or that of any other tyrant who might follow.

**An unfortunate shift in our line**

However, just a month later and into 2014, Socialist Action’s position on Syria began to shift. By the end of 2014, a reader of our newspaper would no longer have read of our solidarity with the struggles of the Syrian people. Although the local committees and local militias still existed—and some pro-democracy and anti-Assad street protests still took place when out of the range of government attack—our paper ignored them. In fact, although a large proportion of rebel groups—perhaps a majority, according to some sources—remained democratic nationalists (even though some had an Islamic orientation), the struggle against Assad was no longer given any credibility at all in our literature. The war was characterized purely as a product of U.S. imperialist efforts to overthrow Assad; it was portrayed as a “U.S.-orchestrated war” in its entirety. All organized forces in the opposition—even including ISIS—were lumped into an amorphous grouping of stooges for U.S. “regime-change” objectives. The word “rebels” was now placed in quotes, since Socialist Action articles assumed (wrongly) that virtually no vestiges of the popular rebellion still existed.

The beginnings of this political shift made its appearance in a few sentences in the Socialist Action pamphlet, “Syria 2014: Imperialist Intervention and Civil War,” by Christine Marie. The pamphlet had much to recommend in it. It reported on the presence of democratic local committees in many towns and villages but explained and warned of the dangers of imperialist intervention, pro-capitalist leadership within the struggle, and the growing takeover of the armed struggle by conservative Islamic forces. However, the introduction by Jeff Mackler, written in November 2013, was far more pessimistic in tone than the rest of the pamphlet’s contents, and described the pro-democracy mass movement as having been completely “marginalized” and “essentially defeated.”

While acknowledging in the pamphlet that “there are reports that in a few towns, revolutionary-minded activists continue to try to develop alternative and radically democratic councils,” Comrade Mackler dismissed them as insignificant in altering the “reactionary” direction of the struggle. That statement, as the war went on, turned out to have some truth in it, but the councils had far more life in them at the time than in Comrade Mackler’s diagnosis. “Today,” he went on to say, “Assad’s organized opponents are undeniably and overwhelmingly cut out of the same cloth as Assad, with the latter [that is, the opponents], at best, using the mass sentiment for fundamental democratic rights, freedom, and justice to achieve reactionary ends.”

An October 2014 Socialist Action newspaper article by Jeff Mackler went still further. Not only had the anti-Assad forces become “reactionary,” said the article, but they were now all seen as working on behalf of U.S. imperialism. “Tragically, in Syria today,” Mackler wrote, “we know of no 'rebel' force that has not been aligned with the U.S. war machine or its allies. There are no ‘rebels’ with any progressive credentials, whether they are of the ISIS variety or those backed directly or indirectly by U.S. imperialism—such as the so-called Free Syrian Army. We are for the defeat of them all.”

The Political Resolution, which Comrade Mackler wrote for the 2014 Socialist Action National Convention, tried to explain: “...today's war in Syria is a war between U.S. imperialism's direct and indirect capitalist-fundamentalist and reactionary forces on the
one hand and the capitalist Assad government on the other. The Syria masses have no independently organized political, military, or economic presence."

Today, with articles, interviews, and entire books on the Syrian war readily available, it can be seen even more clearly that this evaluation in our 2014 Resolution, and in Comrade Mackler’s various articles, was wildly inaccurate. It was not true that the democratic movement had been defeated; in fact, in that period town councils and local and FSA militias made great strides against both Assadist troops and against the encroachment of ISIS. The very large councils that managed the city government of rebel-held Aleppo were not overthrown by the Assadists until the end of 2016, although the bombardment had made it difficult for them to function. The durability of the popular movement was glimpsed during the brief ceasefire of March 2016, when anti-Assad street demonstrations took place in hundreds of Syrian towns and cities under the slogan, “The Revolution Continues.” It was far too early, back in 2014, to simply slam the door on these forces in our literature and condemn them as being “reactionary” and in the pay of the imperialists.

Even in discussions leading up to our 2014 Socialist Action Convention, several comrades in the National Committee argued that the Resolution’s assumptions appeared far over-generalized and not in accord with reports in the news, but since the section on Syria was a very minor part of a long and complex resolution, they ultimately voted in favor of the general line of the document. I presented the oral International Report to the Convention that year, and I don’t remember even mentioning Syria within it—our attention was elsewhere.

It is equally unfortunate that for well over a year Socialist Action had no further discussions on developments in the Syrian war. Thus, it was a shock when, in November 2015, Comrade Mackler submitted an article that moved even further away from our earlier positions.

Mackler originally motivated his article to the Political Committee as providing an analysis of the direct entry of the Russian military into the war and the beginning of massive bombing by the Russians. But Mackler’s article, when it appeared, surprised some comrades by concluding that Russia’s actions in propping up the Assad regime were generally positive and even progressive; they were portrayed as a necessary measure to avoid utter catastrophe. The article included the thundering assertion that “the Russian intervention may well have prevented the overt marching of reactionary jihadist/religious fundamentalist groups or other imperialist-allied forces into Damascus with a resulting Libyan-type chaos, anarchy, and bloodbath to follow.” As a result, the article conjectured, “the opportunities for future Syrian anti-capitalist struggle may become somewhat improved.”

In the PC and National Committee discussions of the article that followed, some comrades took exception to this glowing acceptance of the Russian intervention and the astonishing assertion that the brutal advance of the Assad forces might somehow “improve opportunities for anti-capitalist struggle.” They pointed to the massive civilian casualties that the Russian bombing had caused. How did slaughtering working people and driving them from their homes better equip them to organize a struggle against capitalism?

The SA Political Committee, by majority vote, rejected the line of Comrade Mackler’s article and refused it for publication. (It is important to stress here that the major perspectives outlined in this Resolution on Syria are identical to those of the majority of the Socialist Action Political Committee in 2015.)

Mackler then appealed the PC’s decision to the National Committee, and after a lengthy oral and written NC debate, a slightly improved version of the article was approved by a majority of the National Committee and published in January 2016. That article, together with another one that Mackler wrote in July 2016, were later submitted by him to serve as
the platform of the "Tendency A" grouping in Socialist Action’s 2016 National Convention. The motion to approve the general line of those two articles was adopted by the majority of delegates at the Convention.

The January 2016 article introduced a new tendency in our press to ignore, downplay, or even deny the savagery of the Assad regime. Socialist Action newspaper articles during the next couple of years, while correctly refusing to offer any political endorsement to the Assad government, at the same time applauded the military victories of the counter-revolutionary Assadist army. The articles completely disregarded the extensive documentation of the regime’s terror bombing of working-class civilian populations and many of its worst massacres—often claiming, in contradistinction to the well-publicized facts, that there was “no proof.” The articles even complained that Assad had been unjustly “demonized” for the brutality of his military and security forces.

Thus, in our March 2018 edition, when Russian and Syrian planes were bombing the towns and cities of Eastern Ghouta without mercy—killing close to 1500 civilians and displacing many tens of thousands—Socialist Action offered no compassion, let alone solidarity, with the victims. Instead, author Jeff Mackler merely echoed the “official” explanation of the Syrian state media for its siege and bombardment: “The U.S.-allied terrorists there had been shelling downtown Damascus and other populated areas in this capital for most of the past seven years.”

There are at least a couple of things in this explanation that need adjustment. The first has to do with the blanket reference to so-called “U.S.-allied terrorists.” Leaving aside the exaggeration that all rebel groups fall under the designation of “terrorists,” I think it can be demonstrated that the militias in Eastern Ghouta, which included a broad spectrum of groupings and ideologies, had little or no links with the United States in 2018. There were three major armed alliances in the area, which sometimes feuded and fought among themselves. The three were Jaish al-Islam, a coalition of Islamist units that obtained some Saudi support; Faylaq al-Rahman, an formerly Qatar-supported affiliate of the Free Syrian Army with a relatively “moderate” Islamic orientation; and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the alliance dominated by former al-Nusra members.

A few years ago, Faylaq al-Rahman received some weapons, including TOW anti-tank missiles, from the Military Operations Command (MOC) in Jordan, which had been set up under the aegis of the CIA’s originally secret “Timber Sycamore” program in late 2012. Saudi Arabia contributed money and arms to the endeavor, and Jordan “facilitated” the operation—while reportedly stealing a lot of the arms before they ever entered Syria. But numerous news reports indicate that U.S. and Saudi aid to MOC, which was not great in the first place, was greatly diminished in 2016, and came to a complete halt after Trump suspended the program in the summer of 2017.

At that time, as was done earlier under the Obama administration, Washington instructed all Syrian rebel groups to engage in the fight against ISIS in the east of the country if they wanted to get any U.S. aid. (Some 200 Syrian rebels made the journey to Tanf, in the east, in the several months following Trump’s announcement.)

More egregious in Mackler’s March 2018 article is the fact that his remarks were written as if the few tentative advances that insurgents had made towards the center of Damascus (for example, the street fighting of March 2017 that followed a government attack), and occasional car bombs and releases of mortar shells—which, although the tactics were misguided, resulted in fairly minimal casualties and damage—could possibly provide a rational justification for the giant massacre that Syrian and Russian forces unleashed on civilians in Eastern Ghouta.

Comrade Mackler concluded the article by arguing in favor of the Russian UN delegate’s veto of a resolution in the Security Council for humanitarian relief to be sent to Eastern
Ghouta. Mackler maintained that the resolution was merely "the U.S.’s thinly disguised effort to secure support for yet another imperialist slaughter."

The resolution in question (#2401) had been placed before the Security Council by Sweden and Kuwait on Feb. 9 and called for a 30-day cease-fire so food and medical supplies could be trucked into the enclave—whose 400,000 people had been besieged by the Syrian government since 2013. But the resolution was temporarily held up by Russia, whose UN representative claimed that widespread reporting of heavy civilian casualties was merely “fake news” and the product of “mass psychosis.” After adding modifying conditions to the resolution, the Russian delegation voted for it a few days later.

As it turned out, however, very little of the humanitarian aid was able to get through, as the aid trucks came under fire by Syrian forces. Throughout the war, the Syrian government has blocked most UN food caravans from entering opposition-held areas. Starvation and denying medical aid have been among the regime’s choice tactics in bringing people living in the opposition-administered cities and countryside to their knees.

If comrades would like to hear a voice from Eastern Ghouta during the Assadist bombardment of March 2018—a voice that seven years after the 2011 upsurge still expresses the point of view of the popular democratic movement against the Assad regime—take a look at this short video from the Twitter account of journalist Rami Jarrah (“Alexander Page”). Please listen to the man who speaks in the video, comrades, and ask yourselves whether he sounds like a “terrorist”: “… Assad excuses himself by accusing us of attacking Damascus! We attack the city of Damascus? Our brothers and sisters and children are in Damascus! … We are against anyone being shelled. Not one shell on a civilian, whether they are Alawites or Sunnis or Kurds! … We wish to live normally for just 24 hours! …” See: https://twitter.com/RamiJarrah/status/970992515280199681

Nobody could deny, of course, that the danger that the U.S. might choose to intervene militarily was always in the background. On March 12, in fact, after our newspaper had gone to press, U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley ominously told the Security Council that the U.S. would be willing to step in with firepower to enforce the cease-fire and food deliveries. Russia then said that if the U.S. attacked, it would respond with military action against U.S. aircraft—and Washington backed down from its threat.

Nevertheless, the allegations that the humanitarian measure itself was cover for “another imperialist slaughter” were generally unique to Socialist Action newspaper in the United States (although they reflected somewhat similar claims made, with little evidence, by the Syrian government and repeated on Iranian and Russian international news sites). Our paper never explained how the United States might have planned to make use of UN food trucks for its “slaughter.”

It must be said: In all the 35 proud years of Socialist Action newspaper, our arguing against sending in food trucks to feed a besieged civilian population constituted a real low point. Instead, we could have provided a service if our newspaper had simply explained the sheer hypocrisy of the United States in making entreaties on behalf of the civilians of Eastern Ghouta. The U.S. has slaughtered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times more civilians in its history than the butcher Assad ever has.

We could have pointed to the fact that, in its campaign against ISIS, U.S. bombing leveled a huge section of the city of Raqqa, with little regard for the high civilian casualties. (The Syrian government claims that the U.S. destroyed 90% of the city.) This followed on the heels of the destruction of most of Mosul, in Iraq, by U.S.-directed forces—and of Falluja before that. Building a movement against U.S. intervention in Syria and the Middle East remains essential.
What is the nature of the war?

The scenario in which the United States is seen as instigating and dominating the struggle against the Assad regime, first articulated by Comrade Mackler in 2014, has been elaborated in more recent SA articles and even traced back almost to the very beginnings of the anti-Assad struggle in 2011. The complex motivations and strategies of other forces and countries that have intervened in the war, which often compete with each other, are ignored or minimized.

I think that the evidence is more than sufficient to demonstrate that several concurrent and interconnected wars have been taking place in Syria:

1) **Mass protests, rebellion, self-defense:** After its initial phase of peaceful gatherings that were fired on by Assadist troops, the movement became a *rebellion*—which gained the sympathy and support of a huge proportion of the Syrian population—against the tyrannical regime. As the Assad government continued to use heavy military force to repress and punish the protesters, the peaceful demonstrations almost disappeared; the mass movement changed its nature, waging *armed defensive actions* against Assad’s *counterrevolutionary* onslaught. Although the popular democratic movement has now been strangled, their rear-guard defense against Assad continues until this very day.

2) **Civil war:** Within a year or so after the beginning of armed conflict, various combatants in the war were claiming and fighting over territory; at that point it became a *civil war*. Very soon, however, the course of the civil war was shaped by the fact that outside forces and countries (including imperialist countries) had intervened directly into the war with aid and troops, pursuing their own interests and often competing for influence among the militias. The central core of the conflict in Syria remains that of a *civil war, with outside forces participating in the conflict*.

3) **War of national liberation:** Simultaneously, the Kurdish PYD was waging a *war of national liberation* in the northeast part of the country, although they have given no indication as yet that complete independence is one of their goals.

4) **Counter-revolutionary insurgency:** The entry of ISIS into Syria entailed a war that was waged mainly against the anti-Assad rebels, and much less so against the Syrian government. Although anti-Assad forces were able to repel ISIS in many areas, a vast section of the country that the opposition had been administering, including the city of Raqqa, were conquered by ISIS and added to its so-called caliphate.

5) **Imperialist war and occupation:** After 2014 came the direct military intervention of the U.S., along with Britain and France (in alliance with the Kurds and other Syrian forces), which was directed against ISIS. As a consequence, the U.S. has directly occupied portions of eastern Syria with its troops, and is constructing more permanent bases.

As mentioned, the United States and other imperialist countries were also among the outside players that intervened in the civil war on the side of forces aiming to overthrow Assad, or at least to compel him to step down. U.S. interference took place at the “diplomatic” table (in both overt and semi-secret talks) and in giving a very limited amount of arms, equipment, and training to the struggle. We must protest this intervention and demand "U.S. hands off Syria!" But the point to be made here is that the military aid provided by the United States, was doled out as if through "an eyedropper," and was hardly enough to affect the general progression of the war.

To try to bolster his allegations, Comrade Mackler has from time to time reproduced in his articles quotes from *The New York Times* and *U.S. News and World Report* that describe the CIA’s Timber Sycamore project. The citations show how only about 60 U.S.-trained militia members ever got over the Syrian border, and that most of them were immediately captured, while their equipment was “lost” or handed over to al-Nusra. Rather than proving
Comrade Mackler’s thesis, the reporting on this fiasco merely emphasizes the fact that U.S. military aid and training exercises played a tiny part in the civil war.

Likewise, the missile strikes on Syrian facilities—in 2013 and in 2018—caused very little damage; Syrian and Russian forces were even given advance warning. That “show of force” was carried out mainly to appeal to public opinion in the West.

**2018 DPR errs on Syria**

Although the scale of U.S. intervention was hardly enough to warrant labeling the conflict an “imperialist war to overthrow the Syrian government,” this shortsighted point of view underlies the Syria section of the 2018 Draft Political Resolution that Socialist Action comrades are to vote on. In calling for our 2018 Convention to approve this Resolution on Syria, I am also calling for rejection and deletion of the Syria section of the Draft Political Resolution.

In addition to magnifying the U.S. role in the Syrian war, the Draft Political Resolution also asks comrades to approve of the right of the Assad regime to call in military forces from abroad—Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, etc.—to save it. Of course, no socialists would oppose the right of a neocolonial country to make alliances to protect itself from imperialist intervention, but in this case the foreign troops and airpower have been used in a campaign of terror against Syria’s towns and cities in order to prop up a tyrannical regime. We will look further into this development later in this document.

Finally, the draft DPR makes the astounding assertion that “U.S. protestations to the contrary, U.S. forces often operate in consort with and alongside of the jihadist forces of Al Qaida and ISIS, which it deploys to advance its regime change objectives in Syria. Similarly, the U.S. and its allies organize, finance and arm the so-called Free Syrian Army with the objective of imperialist-led regime change in Syria.” I think it can be demonstrated that allegations of U.S.-ISIS collusion are completely without foundation; this document will delve into the question in a later section.

Socialist Action’s basic position on the war in Syria—as expressed in articles in our press during the last several years, as ratified by our 2016 National Convention, and as partly summarized in our 2018 Draft Political Resolution—requires a major correction. Going forward, we need frequent discussions in the leading bodies of Socialist Action in order to fully analyze developments in the Syrian war as they take place. This will help to ensure objective, balanced, and accurate reporting in our press, while adhering to the principles of revolutionary socialism.

**II. Background to the war**

**The sources of oppression**

From the time of the ancient Assyrians, the area that now constitutes Syria drew great wealth from its agricultural region (part of the “Fertile Crescent”), and prosperous cities grew up in the oases along major trading routes. The temples, mosques, and castles that remain give an idea of the area’s wealth and importance through the centuries. In the modern era, however, Syria—like most of the region—sank into perpetual underdevelopment and poverty, with frequent political and sectarian unrest, armed repression, and wars.

Why did this formerly wealthy area fall into decay? The industrial revolution reached the area late, and natural conditions such as the encroaching desert had its effects as well. But the major roots of oppression and poverty in the Middle East today lie with the crippling
actions of Western imperialism. Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the major perpetrators were Britain and France.

As the quest to corner the world oil monopoly intensified, and particularly after the Second World War, the United States assumed the role of chief colonial exploiter—while using surrogates like Israel to help police the region. Syria is on the periphery of the major oil-producing region, but its geographical location at the “crossroads” of the Middle East, with an extensive Mediterranean seacoast, put it in the path of imperialist intervention.

Syria was traumatized by the First World War. The British blockade, along with natural factors exacerbated by war and underdevelopment—a drought and a plague of locusts—resulted in widespread famine, in which one in seven Syrians lost their lives. Even without the meddling by imperialism, the task of building a new economically viable nation would have been difficult.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Britain and France—betraying their promises of independence to Arab leaders—divided most of the Middle East between them. The region was carved up into isolated vassal states that were economically hobbled, with borders arbitrarily cutting through population groups, and even separating families from their kin on the other side. In several of the Middle Eastern states that the imperialists set up, Hashemite clan leaders were put into place as monarchs, helping to set the pattern of authoritarian heads of state that continues to today. The large Kurdish nation, however, was allowed no state at all, but divided up under the jurisdiction of four countries.

While the British grabbed the southern portion of greater Syria, creating the kingdom of Jordan and British-occupied Palestine, the country that took the name of Syria fell under French rule. This was all according to the “mandate” set up by the League of Nations.

In mid-1919, a Syrian National Congress met in Damascus, and called for an independent Greater Syria, which would include what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. But in the meantime, the Hashemite King Feisal—whose partisan army had aided the Western Allies in the War—made a secret deal with the French to put him on the throne of a far smaller Syrian state. The militant nationalist clubs called the Congress back into session in March 1920, and an agreement was forged with Feisal to set up an independent state with him as constitutional monarch. France then sent an ultimatum to Feisal to disband his Arab army. When the king indicated he would agree to French terms, people rioted in the streets of Damascus. The French then decided it was too late to think any longer of negotiations. They sent troops (mainly from Senegal) and an air squadron, and at the Battle of Maysalun pushed Feisal’s army into flight. On July 26, 1920, the French occupied Damascus; in Paris, the French premier declared that his country would hold Syria from that day, “the whole of it—forever.”

Just as Britain did with its colonies, France acted to stunt the Syrian economy, making the people dependent on imports from France for their livelihood, while heavily taxing Syrian exports. Yet armed revolts broke out throughout the 1920s, and were only put down with extreme measures by French and colonial troops and by murderous aerial bombing.

The French colonial administration carried out a divide-and-rule strategy, pitting ethnic and religious groups against each other. This strategy provided a prototype for the methods that the Assad dynasty utilized many years later. In the period after the 2011 uprising, however, Bashar Assad had to work hard to re-manufacture ethnic and sectarian fears and rivalries, since the rebellion began in most places as a united struggle of Syrians against the regime.

The French split off Lebanon, an artificially stitched-together nation that France held under its control more securely than the rest of Syria. Lebanon was largely constituted around a right-wing Maronite Christian leadership that was resolutely opposed to the pan-Arab sympathies of the region and was able to dominate the other ethnic groups that had
been pulled unwillingly into the rump Lebanese colonial state. With the creation of Lebanon, Damascus was cut off from its port in Beirut and from agricultural land and water resources that served the city. Similarly, before World War II, after the Turkish army had occupied the northwestern coastal region and staged a referendum there for union with Turkey, France obligingly handed the territory over to Turkey in return for promises of neutrality in the coming conflagration. And the French contemplated the creation of other mini-states from what was Syria—an Alawite state in Latakia, another in the south for the Druze, etc. In splitting these ethnic groups off from the Sunni Arab majority, the colonizers gave them preference in social subsidies and lower taxes, with hopes of making them view the French as their exclusive benefactors. (Similar actions were, once again, employed later by the Assad dictatorship.)

On the other hand, the Damascus region—the heart of the majority Sunni Arab population—was treated by the French as occupied territory, and patrolled by colonial troops from Senegal and elsewhere; Alawites, Kurds, Druze, and other minority groups were heavily recruited into the security forces. By the mid-1950s, Alawites already constituted over two-thirds of the non-commissioned officers in the military, though only 12 percent of the population.

“Independence” but no real liberation

At the end of World War II, France acceded to Syrian independence but dragged its feet on withdrawing from the country, leading to the renewal of the Syrian independence movement. French troops fired on demonstrators in several cities—killing hundreds—bombed the Old City of Damascus, and destroyed the parliament building. Of course, the French were in a weakened position coming out of the War. Out of 30,000 Vichy troops stationed in Syria, only 5000 opted to remain there as part of De Gaulle’s so-called “Free French” army; the rest chose to go back home to France. Finally, their British imperialist big brothers invaded Syria to “keep order” and forced the remaining French troops out of the country and into Lebanon. The British agreed to leave Syria in July 1946, and a nominally independent parliamentary republic was set up. The government of the new Syria was dominated by a bloc made up of wealthy merchants, capitalists, and big agricultural landlords, who often lived in the cities. The poor, peasant, and working-class masses achieved little of their demands.

Although revolts were common throughout the 20th century, Syria suffered from a lack of revolutionary leadership—a deficiency that was felt throughout the Middle East. No forces of any size existed in the region that understood the need to build a movement that could fundamentally break with imperialism and with capitalism in general. Instead, the popular struggle was generally subsumed under reform-oriented petty-bourgeois and bourgeois leadership—usually of a military nature.

Beginning in 1949 and for the next decade, a series of military coups and counter-coups occurred—some more nominally “leftist” than others—with an interregnum of several years, beginning in 1954, in which a parliamentary republic was in power. In the process the army became enshrined as the major arbiter in Syrian politics.

In the meantime, an ideological current, the Arab Socialist Ba‘ath Party, had been gaining strength. Following its founding in 1947, the Ba‘ath Party, in Syria as in Lebanon and other countries, originally considered itself to be “nationalist, populist, socialist, and revolutionary.” It was non-Marxist but called for sweeping economic reforms, including the nationalization of some industries, land reform, and unionization of workers.
These policies were generally held in common with those of contemporary nationalist movements in other Middle Eastern countries—several of which came to power during the worldwide anti-colonial revolt of the 1950s and '60s. The major example in the region was that of Egypt; General Gamal Abdel Nasser's overthrow of the monarchy in 1952 rocked the Middle East. His embrace of pan-Arab and “socialist” rhetoric, his government’s nationalization of the Suez Canal (1956), and its standing fast against the imperialists and Israel in the ensuing Suez Crisis launched Nasser's popularity with masses across the region.

In Syria during that period, the Ba'ath party was the second largest in parliament; after 1957, together with the Communist Party, it controlled the government. But after union with Egypt in the United Arab Republic was declared in 1958, parliament was dissolved and non-Nasserist parties were banned. (Nasser had agreed to a union of the two countries largely in order to counter the growing influence of the Communist Party.) Nasser nationalized vast sections of Syria's economy during the union, but many Syrians across the political spectrum (especially the non-Sunni peoples) chafed under the authoritarian regime and the economic and political domination by the Egyptian government.

Right-wing army officers launched a coup in Damascus in 1961 to secede from the UAR, and battles broke out with Nasserite sections of the army. But Nasser soon declared that he would recognize an independent elected Syrian republic, and the parliamentary government came to power again.

Just a year later, a March 1962 coup overthrew the republic. Another coup (February 1963) was engineered by Nasserite and Baathist officers (mainly Alewites), and a second coup a month later (the “March 8 Revolution”), transferred rule to a Ba’athist regime headed entirely by the military. Another coup in 1966 brought leftist-inclined military officers, led by General Salah Jadid, to power. Now it was the Ba’athists’ turn to ban all other parties, though civilians were returned to the head of the government. The Nasserites were purged from the military, and foreign policy tilted more to the Soviet bloc.

In September 1970, “Black September,” Syria sent troops and tanks into Jordan to aid the forces led by the Palestinian Liberation Organization that were under attack by the Jordanian king. When Israel and the United States threatened to intervene, Syria quickly withdrew, leaving the Palestinian exile population to be massacred. That fiasco increased the rivalry inside the Ba’ath leadership: Prime Minister Jadid had argued for full support of the Palestinians, while Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad, representing a more moderate grouping centered in the military, was against it.

Finally, on Nov. 13, 1970, Assad seized the government, in what was called the "Corrective Revolution." Jadid was denounced as a dictator and sent to prison, where he died two decades later.

*The New York Times* pointed out at the time (Nov. 21, 1970): “Admirers of General Assad welcome his seizure of power within the ruling Baath party as the predictable victory of pragmatism over ideology.” Nationalized industry and social welfare policies were rolled back, although they persisted to some degree, and a direct appeal for support (with varying success) was made to the private sector and the Sunni Muslim bourgeoisie though techniques such as tax-free zones. Labor laws were relaxed, and the unions were folded into a state-run apparatus.

Under Assad, a new 173-member “People’s Council” was set up, in which the Ba’ath Party held half the seats. Ba’athists also constituted half of Assad’s 26-man cabinet, with minor parties (Stalinist Communists, Nasserites, and social democrats) taking the rest of the posts. A new constitution was approved in 1973, which declared Syria to be a secular, socialist state, with Islam recognized as the majority religion.
Of course, Syria’s “socialism” was always in name only. But the working class and peasants obtained some benefits, which helped to wed many of them to the pro-Assad base. For example, land was expropriated and divided among landless farmers, massive irrigation and rural electrification projects were undertaken, roads were built, and state farms were set up. Subsidies were expanded for food products, diesel oil, fertilizers, and machinery. These items were paid for in part by increased oil revenues; a few years before Assad took power, a pipeline had been built connecting the oil fields in the northeast with Syria’s Mediterranean port at Tartous. The USSR and wealthy Arab states also contributed development funds.

With the industry that had been nationalized during previous regimes, a bloated and self-seeking state bureaucracy had emerged. Assad enlarged the bureaucracy still further, along with the military, and tied them closer to his regime; favoritism and corruption became rife. Favored individuals and families (especially from the Alawite ethnic group, which the Assad family belonged to) prospered with posts in the government and security apparatus, and with lucrative state contracts. A new enlarged capitalist class was built, which saw its fortunes tied directly to the regime. Patrick Seale, in his "Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East" (1980), called it the “military-mercantile alliance.”

The “secularism” within Syria’s stated goals was a fluid and pragmatic concept, but it appealed to many “modernists” among the urban elite. Also, by describing itself as a defender of religious pluralism and Arab unity across the religious divide, the state was able to cement the allegiance of many Alawis, Druze, Christians, and other religious minorities—who had suffered persecution by Sunni Muslims under the old Ottoman regime. (And in that way, when the upsurge began against Bashar Assad in 2011, the regime was able to raise the alarm among these minority groupings by falsely portraying it as an Islamist sectarian insurgency.)

Since the first decades of Assadist rule saw a general growth in the economy, the alliance with the Soviet Union bloc was solid, and Assad continued to play to the pan-Arab, anti-Israel, and anti-imperialist sympathies of the masses, the regime was able to knit some additional portions of Syrian society behind it—including many who formerly had tended to back the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the majority of the Sunni business class.

At the same time, a police state was set up, with ruthless methods of repression that continued under the rule of his son, Bashar Assad. Utilizing the 1963 “state of emergency,” which lasted for half a century, independent trade unions and protest demonstrations were banned, and an extensive system of police, prisons, torture chambers, and a domestic spy apparatus was built to keep down political opposition. Most importantly, the state security apparatus and elite military units and officers’ corps were filled with Assad loyalists—helping to fortify the regime against further coups.

**Stalinists laud the “progressive, anti-imperialist” military**

The Communist Party in Syria was one of the “opposition” parties that knelt down to the Assad regime, even serving for a time in Assad’s cabinet. The party followed the course of its Stalinist counterparts worldwide in generally supporting the nationalist military regimes of the Middle East under the ruse that they were anti-imperialist (and thus pro-Soviet) and would somehow open the door to working-class advancement in the distant future.

The Syrian CP rejected the thesis of Permanent Revolution, instead following the vague Stalinist dictum of a “two-stage” progression—first through capitalism, and some time later, by gradual means, moving toward socialism. This policy, which led inexorably to class-collaboration with pro-capitalist “nationalist” regimes, had been hatched in the Soviet Union
under Stalin and his successors, and was faithfully carried out by Communist Parties around the world.

In Guatemala, for example, little more than a year before the 1954 CIA-backed coup that overthrew the reformist government there, the Communist Party declared that it considered the armed forces to be the representatives of a “progressive and anti-imperialist” national bourgeoisie. It denounced proposals to arm the workers and poor peasants as being “the maneuvers of internal reaction, attempting to counterpose a workers’ and peasants’ united front to the armed forces.” Unfortunately, the supposedly “progressive” armed forces soon rallied to the coup plotters and connived in the terroristic dictatorship that followed. (See the discussion in Michael Löwy, “The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development,” Verso 1981.)

But terrible defeats such as the one in Guatemala did not shake the Stalinist “theoricians” in Moscow. One of them, V.G. Solodovnikov, explained in a book written in 1973 that so-called “national democratic” countries such as Egypt, Iraq, and Hafez Assad’s Syria—despite their authoritarian regimes—embodied a “democratic dictatorship of the revolutionary people.” In those countries, he said, “the military intelligentsia is the most anti-imperialist force. In order to withstand the pressure of the imperialists and the exploiter class in general, the democratic military intelligentsia takes political power into its own hands” (quoted in Löwy).

In contrast, Trotsky, as long ago as the 1920s in his analysis of China, pointed out that the capitalist class in the neo-colonial and underdeveloped world is “organically and unbreakably linked with world finance.” Notwithstanding the occasional rousing “anti-imperialist” rhetoric of certain political leaders, he stressed, the bourgeoisie that keeps them in power is unwillling and unable to remain independent of imperialism.

Trotsky returned to that theme toward the end of his life, in 1939, in his analysis of the anti-colonial struggle that was just starting to get underway in India: “The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price, and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet!” (“India Faced with Imperialist War,” July 25, 1939, in “Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1939-1940).

Our method in looking at national liberation struggles is to look to the working class itself for leadership, in alliance with the poor peasantry. In speaking of the right of self-determination—i.e., the right of oppressed, colonized nations to independence from imperialism—revolutionary socialists do not neglect the class struggle and the crucial role of the working class within the oppressed nation. Before the Russian Revolution, Lenin was a pioneer among Marxists in pointing to the potential importance of the working class in the anti-imperialist struggles in underdeveloped and neo-colonial countries. Lenin pointed out in his 1916 thesis, “Socialist Revolution and Self-determination” that the struggle for national liberation and the class struggle reinforce each other.

The Russian Revolution, which took place the following year, produced convincing evidence of the necessity of making a successful socialist revolution, led by the working class and involving the ranks of the poor peasantry, as an essential requirement in achieving liberation for nationalities that are oppressed by imperialism.

Trotsky explained years later, in regard to Ukraine’s right to self-determination, “The right of self-determination is, of course, a democratic and not a socialist principle. But genuinely democratic principles are supported and realized in our era only by the revolutionary proletariat; it is for this very reason that they interlace with revolutionary tasks. The resolute struggle of the Bolshevik Party for the right of self-determination of
oppressed nationalities in Russia facilitated in the extreme the conquest of power by the proletariat. It was as if the proletarian revolution had sucked in the democratic problems, above all the agrarian and national problems, giving to the Russian Revolution a combined character” (“Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1939-40).

Later, the right of self-determination of oppressed nationalities in the Soviet Union was truncated by Stalin and his henchmen—just as they sabotaged the fight against imperialist domination in the colonial world. In Syria, because of their policy in support of Assad, even serving as a “loyal opposition” within the Assad government, the Stalinists found themselves with little influence among people who protested the regime in 2011. The treachery of the Stalinists, in fact, tended to give what was mistakenly perceived as “Marxism” and “communism” a bad name in many quarters of the Syrian opposition. The lack of an authentic revolutionary socialist mass-based leadership created a political vacuum that was filled in part by Islamist clerics and militia forces.

Regardless, even today, the Stalinists and groups like the Workers World Party in the United States persist in praising the government of Syria, and similar regimes, as being within the camp of “progressive” and “anti-imperialist” countries.

Bonapartism

If the Stalinist labels “democratic nationalist,” “anti-imperialist,” and “progressive” do not appear to accurately describe Syria’s peculiar balance between competing groups, its combination of demagoguery and repression, how should we characterize the regime?

The government put in place by the elder Assad, and continued by his son, might be viewed as the apparatus of a “Bonapartist” state, similar in many respects to those that Marx and Trotsky analyzed in their own epochs. Bonapartism refers to a form of capitalist state that is set up, generally as a temporary measure in times of class conflict, around a Napoleon-like strongman (often a military figure) who appears to stand “above” the struggle of classes. Protest and revolt are kept in check by means of half-way reforms, maintaining a “social pact” with compliant forces in the workers’ movement, and sheer demagoguery on the one hand, and by the threat of repression on the other.

Trotsky, for example, considered the regime of Gen. Lázaro Cárdenes in Mexico to have had a Bonapartist character. He wrote in 1938: “The government veers between foreign and domestic capital, between the weak national bourgeoisie and the relatively powerful proletariat. This gives the government a Bonapartist character sui-generis [in a class by itself]. ... It raises itself, so to speak, above classes” (quoted in Löwy).

In Syria under Hafez Assad, the workers movement was far weaker than it had been in Mexico, and Syrian workers and opposition currents fell prey to much more severe repression than Mexico had ever seen. However, the Hafez Assad regime succeeded in bringing a measure of stability to Syria. Although a few coups were attempted, they did not get very far. Guerrilla warfare by Islamists continued for years, but retaliation was always swift and merciless.

In 1980, for example, only hours after an aborted assassination attempt on Assad, a large number of imprisoned Islamists (some reports say over 1200) were executed in their cells. And in 1982, after an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood—an uprising that had roots in the conflict between Sunni Arabs in the region and the Alawite-centered government—Assad ordered his troops (almost all Alawites) to besiege the town of Hama (a mainly Sunni center of the insurgency). The Old City was virtually destroyed by aerial bombing. The population was ordered to flee and warned that anyone remaining would be considered a rebel. Then a massacre took place, with many families slaughtered in their beds. The deaths
were estimated as high as 20,000 (journalist Robert Fisk), 38,000 (a boast by Assad’s brother Rifaat), and 30,000 to 40,000 (Syrian Human Rights Committee).

The memory of the Hama Massacre persisted for many years in the consciousness of Syrians as a warning of what might take place if the Assad regime felt itself to be provoked. Tragically, Bashar has done more than follow in the bloody footsteps of Hafez Assad; his ruthlessness has far out-distanced that of his father. We will say more about repression under Bashar Assad in a moment.

**Bashar in power: Neo-liberalism and austerity**

In the 1990s, Hafez Assad came down with a prolonged illness. The question arose as to who would succeed him. The heir apparent, eldest son Bassel al-Assad, died in a car crash in 1994, and his younger brother Bashar was immediately recalled to Syria from his medical studies in England. Bashar was groomed for the succession by first entering military school; in 1998, he was put in charge of Syria’s military forces in Lebanon and soon became a brigadier general, providing him with the essential authority he would require within the all-important military hierarchy. 

Hafez Assad died in the year 2000, and a month later, his son Bashar became the new president, commander of the armed forces, and head of the Ba’ath Party of Syria. David W. Lesch, in “Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad,” commented: “The Alawite-dominated military-security apparatus, as well as leading (mostly Sunni) businessmen tied into the regime, saw in Bashar al-Assad the best chance (or perhaps the least worst) of maintaining their political, economic and social positions and status. This, above all other reasons, is why Bashar became president. He was young, he had gained a certain amount of popularity, he was an Alawite, and most importantly—he was an Assad.”

After gaining a rubber-stamp approval by the national assembly, the issue of Bashar's ascension to the presidency for a seven-year term was presented in a referendum to the electorate; no other candidates were on the ballot. Bashar received 99.7% “yes” votes by official count, and 97.6% in a new referendum seven years later.

Although Syria is officially a republic, we should have no illusions that any kind of “democracy” exists there—even by the grossly distorted standards of the capitalist two-party system in the United States. It is true, of course, that Assad “won” the 2000 and 2007 unopposed referendums. He even “won” the election of 2014, in which, in a manner of speaking, he did have some “opposition.” According to government data, Bashar Assad received 88.7% of the vote, while his two opponents—including a “communist,” Maher al-Hajjar—got 7.5% between them. But the polls in Assad's Syria are hardly secret, with government watchers often looking over voters’ shoulders to make sure that they cast their ballot “correctly.” Moreover, the last election was held in the midst of the civil war, with a substantial portion of the citizenry not voting because they were in exile or living in the broad areas of the country under rebel or Kurdish control. Although many people in the refugee camps and abroad did vote, the overwhelming majority did not.

Thus, it is astounding that some groups on the U.S. left were able to gush over what they saw as the “democratic” attributes of the regime. For example, *Workers World* newspaper (June 24, 2014) reported the comments from a panel of U.S. leftists who had recently returned from Syria, where they observed the presidential elections. *Workers World* stated: “All described how throughout Syria [this was when Assad controlled barely a third of the country], the support for President Bashar al-Assad was massive, leaving no doubt that he was the legitimate victor.”

The newspaper quoted July Bello, a panelist who is active on the Administrative Committee of UNAC. Bello said: “Observing the popular support for the Syrian election
was a moving experience. The people voted from their hearts. ... The overwhelming response of the people inside and outside of Syria sent a powerful message to the world of loyalty to their country and to the government that is currently safeguarding it.”

Of course, when Bashar first came to power, he was projected as a young, mild-mannered modernizer. He pledged to fight corruption and improve government transparency, and even expressed some muted criticisms of his father’s authoritarian regime. In response, groups of intellectuals in the cities began to meet in forums, where they spoke out about the need to roll back some of the more onerous policies of the past—like the 1963 state of emergency. Demands for a multi-party parliamentary system, releasing all political prisoners, and for women’s rights were put forward. Remarkably, the forums were not immediately repressed. For a while the government even gave the appearance of listening to their criticisms, and as a gesture of seeming goodwill, a number of political prisoners were released from prison.

A year after it began, however, in the autumn of 2001, the “Damascus Spring” was put down; some of its most outspoken participants were arrested and sentenced to years in prison on fake charges like “inciting racial and sectarian strife.” The same year, the Syrian government passed the Press Law, which subjected all printed media (even posters) to government censorship and control. In 2007, Facebook was banned, along with other internet services that were considered to be possible channels for political dissent.

In 2010, a year before the mass rebellion began, Human Rights Watch commented in a report: “Syria’s prisons are filled again with political prisoners, journalists, and human rights activists ... it is clear that after a decade in power, Bashar al-Assad has not taken the steps necessary to truly improve his country’s human rights record. He has focused his efforts on opening up the economy without broadening public freedoms or establishing public institutions that are accountable for their actions. So while visitors to Damascus are likely to stay in smart boutique hotels and dine in shiny new restaurants, ordinary Syrians continue to risk jail merely for criticizing their president, starting a blog, or protesting government policies.

“The state of emergency, enacted in 1963, remains in place, and the government continues to rule by emergency powers. Syria’s security agencies, the feared mukhabarat, continue to detain people without arrest warrants, frequently refuse to disclose their whereabouts for weeks and sometimes months, and regularly engage in torture.”

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said further in a 2010 article, “Whether President al-Assad wanted to be a reformer but was hampered by an entrenched old guard or has been just another Arab ruler unwilling to listen to criticism, the outcome for Syria’s people is the same: no freedom, no rights. ... Al-Assad’s record after 10 years is that he has done virtually nothing to improve his country’s human rights record.”

In regard to Whitson’s question about the influence of the “old guard,” which has been posed by many other commentators, there is evidence that “hard-line” military elements from his father’s regime did have an effect on Bashar Assad’s actions in allowing the retrenchment of the authoritarian state. This was reflected, for example, in the situation soon after the 2011 uprising had begun when Assad drew back from earlier indications that he might grant some of the protesters’ demands—instead opting to employ heavy repression against the movement.

But in regard to economic reforms, it appears that Bashar managed to sweep aside the objections of many old-line Ba’athists and government bureaucrats who had a stake in the perpetuation of the state-controlled and corporatist system. His economic reforms were substantial, with an acceleration of the process that began under his father toward privatizations and opening the economy to foreign investment.
Beginning in the 1970s, and more so during the 1980s and '90s, the Hafez Assad regime had taken a number of steps toward a “market” economy. It rolled back state subsidies to industry, directing funds instead to the military. More crops (such as cotton) were grown for the export market. State-owned industries were generally not privatized under Hafez Assad, but they were forced to compete with private enterprises, which were handed special tax breaks and other incentives. The private sector was encouraged to become the main engine of economic development, instead of the state. But since the weak Syrian capitalist class was unable or unwilling to boost their investments sufficiently in domestic industry and infrastructure (a standard problem in underdeveloped countries), the government increasingly opted for deals with multi-national corporations.

As the new millennium began, the Syrian economy began to weaken. Revenue was down. The Gulf States were less lavish in sharing their oil money with Syria, now that confrontation with Israel had become less of a priority for them. The withdrawal of the Syrian army, officials, and workers from Lebanon in 2005 deprived the regime of hundreds of millions of dollars in remittances and in money gained from smuggling over the border. Moreover, Syrian oil production peaked in 1996; by 2006 Syria had become a net importer of oil.

In order to deal with these problems, the Bashar Assad regime chose to greatly deepen the process of neoliberal reform. In December 2000, state farms and other state-owned lands were privatized; farm cooperatives were broken up. Although some peasants were no doubt pleased over having been given ownership of the land they worked, the reform allowed people to rent out or sell their land to others. In an instant, decades of land reform were undone. Once again, as in the colonial days of the past, much of the land became concentrated into large privately owned estates, now mostly owned by wealthy people who were loyal to the regime. By 2008, 28 percent of farmers utilized 75 percent of irrigated land, while 49 percent of farmers had only 10 percent.

Unlike his father, Bashar sought loans from the IMF and the World Bank. An IMF assessment of the liberalization period from 1990 to 2005 offered praise for the series of economic reforms by the Assads, father and son. Under Bashar, the report enthused, "Prices have been largely liberalized [i.e., prices skyrocketed for working people], trade and foreign exchange regimes have been simplified and liberalized [i.e., foreign corporations could come in with less restrictions and oversight], the tax system has been streamlined, and the private sector’s field of activity has been broadened to virtually all sectors of the economy, including banking and insurance."

The country’s private sector, which represented 52 percent of GDP in 2000, ballooned to 61 percent seven years later, and as much as 70 percent by 2010, according to some estimates. But those who got rich were centered within the inner circle of Assad loyalists. Bashar’s multi-billionaire cousin Rami Makhlouf was the most notorious of the fabulously wealthy members of the Assad family. According to the Financial Times, Makhlouf is said to have controlled through his many links around 60 percent of the Syrian economy, using state channels to block competition. Before, Assad’s family and their cronies plundered the public sector; now they captured the newly privatized property and businesses for their own use.

Although the economy was growing at an average rate of five percent before the uprising erupted, this growth was mainly attributed to oil revenues—95 percent of which was sold to European countries—underpinned by the increase in international oil prices since 2002. The fact that oil reserves were being exhausted was worrisome. But nevertheless, viewed from Damascus, times were good. Investors from wealthy Arab states, like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, sensed that money could be made, and were ready to pour money into tourist hotels and resorts, real estate, and financial services. Shops in central Damascus and Aleppo were
overflowing with expensive imported goods, cafés were crowded with yuppies, and the streets were filled as never before with newly purchased automobiles.

**Poverty in rural areas; migration to the cities**

In the meantime, however, the gulf widened between rich and poor, and between big city and countryside. In accord with IMF dictates, subsidies to the poor were slashed. Subsidies for fertilizer and diesel fuel (essential for heating, water pumps, and transporting crops to market) were cancelled after 2005; the price of diesel fuel more than tripled virtually overnight in May 2008. The price of basic foodstuffs rose by 20 percent in 2010, while wheat prices rose by 30 percent. Medical care, once free, became increasingly privatized and fee-based. Schools, particularly colleges and universities, were also privatized.

Unemployment was close to 20 percent in 2010, and much higher among youth. The Minister of Labor and Social Affairs reported in December 2011 that unemployment stood at between 22 and 30 percent. The share of wages in Syria’s GDP fell from 40.5 percent in 2004 to less than 33 percent in 2008-2009. According to a UN report, the amount of people living in poverty rose to 33.6 percent (almost 7 million people) in 2007, including 56 percent of those living in rural areas.

Poverty increased most in the historically poor northeastern agricultural region of the country, known as the Jezira. The area serves as Syria’s breadbasket (responsible for 70 percent of wheat production) but much of it is dependent on irrigation; the effects of the severe drought between 2006 and 2011 were deepest there. The regime mismanaged the crisis, continuing the over-ambitious agricultural development projects of the Hafez Assad years. Monocultures of water-needy crops such as cotton, together with overgrazing, depleted groundwater reserves and impoverished the soil. Fertile land became desert. Close to 75 percent of farmers in the Jezira suffered near total crop failure; by January 2008, flocks of cattle and goats had been reduced by half. The use of polluted river water to irrigate crops caused outbreaks of food poisoning among consumers.

The Syrian government under Bashar Assad brought some industry to the northeast region, such as the French-owned and Chinese-built LCS cement factory in Jalabiyya—Syria’s largest private-sector investment outside of the oil industry. But, as was typical, the factory hired very few local villagers for its unskilled jobs. Skilled workers and managers were brought in from cities in the western part of the country and from Egypt.

Even before the drought, between 2002 and 2008, Syria had lost 40 percent of its agricultural workforce. With the onset of the drought, close to 1.5 million rural people abandoned their farms and villages and migrated to the cities, or to shantytowns and tent camps outside the cities, in search of work. This migration contributed to the situation in which some 40 percent of Syria’s housing stock was estimated to have been built without permits and to have lacked state-provided water and electricity.

As in the northeast, similar developments due to depletion of water reserves took place in other regions of the country—such as the province of Daraa, near the Jordanian border. In early March 2011, just days before protests erupted, an International Crisis Group team reported in Daraa that “local residents warned of an explosive situation; any spark might cause it to detonate.”

Understanding the strong pre-war gap between rich and poor, and between city and countryside, can help us to see the social characteristics—including the class basis—of the revolt against Assad.

There is evidence, of course, that much of the initial organizing of the pro-democracy upsurge was carried out by “tech-savvy” youth in the cities and campuses who had been inspired by their rebelling counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia. The events of the Arab Spring
had a tremendously energizing effect on student youth—many of whom were children of the bourgeoisie.

Nevertheless, the protest movement soon caught fire within the communities of poor migrants ringing the cities. From there it spread to the small hometowns and rural villages where many people had become disaffected with Assad’s neo-liberal policies. In contrast, people from the central cities, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, were slower to join the protests—though many city youth made their way to participate in demonstrations in working-class suburbs, where police repression was less concentrated and they were less likely to be identified by informers. This was unlike Egypt and Tunisia, where the major protest demonstrations took place in the center of the capital cities.

The class divide could be glimpsed in later phases of the war in the line of battle that bisected the city of Aleppo. The working-class and poorer areas of Aleppo and its suburbs were in the hands of rebel forces and functioned under rebel committees, while the bourgeois and upper-middle-class areas remained generally loyal to Assad.

But poorer people, and those with peasant backgrounds, are more apt to be socially conservative, traditional, and religious in their beliefs than the more “sophisticated” and wealthier people of the big cities. In Bashar Assad’s Syria, moreover, religious clerics had gained influence in education and charitable works, as the state withdrew subsidies and from social involvement. And once the protest movement was underway, meetings often had to take place during the Friday sermon in mosques since regular political meetings were prohibited by the regime. Those are among the reasons why a great number of the organizing committees and the local militias, at the same time that they called for democratic reforms, took on an Islamic character from the beginning.

Even among the Islamists, there was a great deal of variation in goals and beliefs; for instance, some called for Sharia laws to be applied while others did not. Some called for a theocratic state in which Islamic teachings were paramount, while others sought a pluralist or secular democracy. Moreover, these Islamic-influenced groupings that reflected the beliefs and mores of the local people must be distinguished from those who are often termed “jihadists”—groupings that sought to wage a war to spread their austere brand of Islam over the world, and to punish or kill all whom they viewed as infidels. (The origins and role of radical Islam in the Syrian struggle, and ISIS in particular, will be discussed later in this Resolution.)

It is important to refrain from denigrating Islamic-oriented organizations within the struggle against the Assad regime, without making any attempt to distinguish their specific political goals. It might help us to understand that various Islamic-oriented groups have disparate and conflicting political views by comparing the situation in Syria to that of the United States—where socially conscious Christian church congregations have served as organizing centers for immigrant rights, Black rights, and the antiwar movement. Obviously, these progressive Christians have little in common with the Bible-thumping segregationists of the South, the reactionary Tea Party mobs, and the anti-women “right to lifers,” who also profess to be Christians.

Working people who are socially conservative and religious, and express backward opinions on issues like women’s rights, can be won to progressive ideas, and even to socialism. The path from social conservatism toward class-consciousness and political maturation is generally slow and uneven, but it can move at lightning speed in times of social crisis, when political actions are given revolutionary leadership. In fact, that is precisely what happened during the Russian Revolution, when hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers, who had arrived not long before from the countryside, were won to the program of the Bolshevik Party.
III. From upsurge to civil war

Assad represses the protest movement

After the protest movement had begun, the fate of the country was largely in the hands of Bashar Assad. According to many accounts, millions of Syrians waited with great expectations for Assad’s March 30, 2011, televised address to the Syrian national assembly. Assad had made earlier comments indicating that he might offer significant reforms, and the vice president, Farouq al-Sharaa, smoothed the way for the TV address, cheerily assuring the population that Assad would say things that would please them all.

Assad began his speech by expressing muted approval of the recent mass democracy protests in the Middle East (the Arab Spring), agreeing that some changes were certainly in order, “if the people want them.” He declared that the “Arab street” was the “real leader” of society. He made clear, however, that Syria was “different” than other countries in the region because of “the links between myself and the people.”

Assad conceded that Syria could certainly use “reforms” and that some protesters had “good intentions.” But he went on to paint a picture in which the protests, city by city, had been incited by conspirators from abroad, who used the internet and satellite TV stations to create divisions and religious sectarianism. Then, Assad charged, “these people” started “shooting people indiscriminately to create more anger.” (This was in the first weeks of the peaceful protests, when the only ones who were armed were regime snipers and provocateurs.)

Assad fell back on the blood and thunder rhetoric of his father’s regime, claiming that Syria was the victim of “a great conspiracy, whose tentacles extend” to foreign powers that were plotting to destroy the country, and warned, “we have to protect ourselves.” He concluded by stating ominously that “burying sedition is a national, moral, and religious duty. ... There is no compromise or middle way in this.”

This 2011 speech laid the groundwork for the rhetoric that has served the Assad regime throughout the war: The opposition groupings are at their core nothing but religious sectarians, gangsters, and terrorists in the pay of a foreign conspiracy; therefore they are subject to extermination by military means. All Syrians who refuse to stand up to fight the terrorists are likewise guilty—and will be dealt with.

Although Assad’s characterization of the protesters as “terrorists” was sheer fiction in 2011, his regime worked assiduously to stir up the pot of sectarian violence. Assad released from prison a number of battle-hardened Islamist radicals, who had had nothing to do with the protests. Some of these men later went on to become leaders of radical Islamic militias. At the same time, real protest leaders, intellectuals, and artists were detained, and often tortured and killed. Religious shrines were demolished in order to enrage the Sunni population, while minority groupings, like the Alawites, were given false warnings that bands of Sunnis were marching on their neighborhoods to seek revenge. And as always, protesters in demonstrations were mowed down by soldiers and snipers without mercy.

With the profusion of reports about the atrocities waged by the Assad regime, it is astonishing that the subject is never reported on in Socialist Action newspaper—aside from occasional routine mention that Assad’s troops fired on a few protests in the early days. Missing from our newspaper’s commentary is the fact that, in order to remain in power, the Syrian government has used extreme violence and terror continually against its own population. You will not read in Socialist Action about the thousands of people who “disappeared” into the Assadist gulag—some of whose mangled corpses were identified only years later.
At long last, in the May 2018 issue of Socialist Action newspaper, writer Bruce Lesnick ventured to mention the question of repression by the Assad regime: “And what of charges that the Syrian government represses its own citizens? Well, given that Syria is a capitalist country—which means that the majority work to produce the wealth while a small elite controls all the wealth and power—it’s a foregone conclusion that there is repression and exploitation.”

That observation is fair enough; Marxists understand that repression is the fundamental purpose of the state under capitalism. But what sort or degree of repression are we dealing with in Syria? Unfortunately, although he might have cited hundreds of reports of such repression, Comrade Lesnick was not specific and merely pointed out that another capitalist country, the United States, has resorted to repression through the centuries—genocide against Native Americans, slavery, segregation. And so, is Syria also guilty of repressive acts? Comrade Lesnick shrugged off the question, saying, “Still most crimes the Assad government is accused of have not been proven.”

Naturally, among the countless charges of terror, brutality, and sadism that have been made against the Assad government, whether or not “most” of them have been proven is unclear. But more to the point is the fact that a mountain of evidence exists to verify the tremendous number of horrible crimes against humanity that have been perpetrated by the Assad regime—massacres, torture, blockades of food to the cities, and more. Here are a few of the reports that are readily available on-line and in the major media:

**Exhibit A: Protesters shot and killed**

In December 2011—at which point some 4000 protesters had been killed by the government—Human Rights Watch issued an 88-page report based on interviews with more than 60 Syrian soldiers and intelligence officers who had defected. The report names commanders and officials, up to the highest levels of the government, who ordered or condoned killings, torture, and unlawful arrests during the 2011 protests. (See: [https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/12/15/all-means-necessary/individual-and-command-responsibility-crimes-against-humanity ](https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/12/15/all-means-necessary/individual-and-command-responsibility-crimes-against-humanity"

A sample quote from the report is the following: “’Said,’ who was deployed to Talbiseh with the 134th Brigade, 18th Division, said that after the military moved into the town in early May, intelligence agencies and the military started conducting daily raids, arresting ‘anyone older than 14 years—sometimes 20, and sometimes a hundred people.’ Said also said that the arrest raids, authorized by the mukhabarat and the military, were accompanied by ‘brazen looting’ and burning of shops.”

Another soldier told the researchers: “At one point we killed eight people in 15 minutes. The protesters were unarmed. They didn’t even have rocks! That’s when I decided to defect. I threw away my gun and ran towards the protesters. Somebody picked me up in a van and took me home to Daraa.”

Eight defectors told Human Rights Watch that they had witnessed officers or intelligence agents killing soldiers who refused to fire on unarmed protesters. Here is one quote: “The soldiers were in front. Colonel Khader and the security agents were standing right behind us. Yusuf Musa Krad, a 21-year-old conscript from Daraa, was standing right next to me. At some point the colonel noticed that Yusuf was only shooting in the air. He told First Lieutenant Jihad from the regional branch of Military Intelligence. They were always together. Jihad called a sniper on the roof, pointed at Yusuf, and the sniper then shot Yusuf twice in the head. Security agents took Yusuf’s body away. The next day we saw Yusuf’s body on TV. They said that he had been killed by terrorists.”
Exhibit B: Torture

A year later, in July 2012, Human Rights Watch released a separate report on torture by the Assad regime, in which it identified the locations, agencies responsible, methods of torture, and commanders in charge of 27 detention facilities in the country. The 81-page report was based on more than 200 interviews, and contained maps of detention facilities, video accounts from former detainees, and sketches of torture techniques described by people who had witnessed or been subjected to them. (See: https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/03/syria-torture-centers-revealed)

Techniques of torture that are described include beatings with batons and wire, electric shock, burning with car battery acid, sexual assault, pulling of fingernails, and mock execution.

This quote from a former Syrian intelligence officer lists some of the methods that were used: “The mildest form of torture is hitting people with batons on their arms and legs and not giving them anything to eat or drink. Then they would hang the detainees from the ceiling by their hands, sometimes for hours or days. I saw it while I was talking to the interrogators. They used electric stun-guns and an electroshock machine, an electric current transformer. It is a small machine with two wires with clips that they attach to nipples and a knob that regulates the current. In addition, they put people in coffins and threatened to kill them and close the coffin. People were wearing underwear. They pour hot water on people and then whip them. I’ve also seen drills there, but I’ve never seen them being used. I’ve also seen them using martial art moves, like breaking ribs with a knee kick. They put pins under your feet and hit you so that you step on them. I also heard them threatening to cut off the detainees’ penises.”

One of the victims told the interviewers: “They forced me to undress. Then they started squeezing my fingers with pliers. They put staples in my fingers, chest, and ears. I was only allowed to take them out if I spoke. The nails in the ears were the most painful. They used two wires hooked up to a car battery to give me electric shocks. They used electric stun-guns on my genitals twice. I thought I would never see my family again. They tortured me like this three times over three days.”

Three years later, in May 2015, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed that at least 60,000 people had died as a result of torture or dire conditions in the prisons since the beginning of the protests. Around the same time, Amnesty International documented 17,723 dead in the regime’s torture centers.

Exhibit C: Top Assadist officials implicated

Evidence that political repression was approved by the highest echelons of the Syrian government is contained in the over 600,000 documents issued by Syria’s security apparatus that have been smuggled out of the country and are now housed in 265 boxes stored in Europe. The collection was formed under the auspices of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, an investigative body formed in 2012 in response to the Syrian war. The core of the documents were gathered by Abdelmaaid Barakat, a functionary in the Syrian government before he defected. Other papers were collected by activists in the early phases of the war when government offices were quickly abandoned after rebel forces seized government-held territory.

The work of the commission resulted, in 2016, in a 400-page legal brief, which linked the murder and torture of tens of thousands of Syrians to a written policy approved by Assad and then diffused among police and intelligence agencies and other governmental and Ba’ath Party offices throughout the country.
Barakat was able to obtain the documents due to his position as an employee of the Central Crisis Management Cell, an organ of the Ba’ath Party composed of top Syrian officials and created by Assad in March 2011 to deal with the outbreak of protests. An article by Ben Taub in the April 18, 2016 edition of The New Yorker gives a thorough account of the functioning of the Crisis Cell, and Barakat himself gives more details in a deposition he swore to in a court suit (Colvin v. Syrian Arab Republic) in Washington, D.C., in December 2017.

Barakat states in his deposition that the Cell was the highest national-security body in Syria, outside of Assad himself. The chairman was Mohammad Said Bekheitan, the highest official of the Ba’ath Party after Assad. Bashar’s younger brother, Maher, was an occasional guest. The Crisis Cell met almost daily in the early months of the democracy upsurge to formulate the regime’s strategy and tactics of repression. These plans were detailed in the daily minutes, which were then delivered by courier to Bashar Assad in person. It was Assad’s role to give the final go-ahead, and return the plans to the Crisis Center for implementation. Sometimes, Barakat, reported, Assad made revisions. No security decisions, he said, were too small to not require Assad’s approval.

Barakat’s job was to process the mountain of confidential security memos that came to the Cell from around the country regarding the perceived threat of protests. He read the papers and summarized them for use in Crisis Cell meetings. Soon after he started work, in April 2011, he began leaking documents to contacts in the Syrian opposition, who forwarded them to Middle Eastern news media.

Barakat found that although the regime claimed that it was allowing peaceful demonstrations, the memos showed that security agents were targeting protesters with violence. He said in his declaration that the communications were very strict about the prescribed vocabulary to be employed. Non-violent protesters were routinely referred to as “terrorists” or “outlaws,” which indicated that military means could be used against them. The same vocabulary is in use today. Civilian casualties were “dead people,” while casualties among security people were “martyrs.”

Barakat stated in his 2018 declaration that he witnessed top officials discussing sending agents provocateurs into crowds of demonstrators, planting weapons in mosques, and even selling weapons to people in order to create a pretext for violent crackdowns.

Documents that have been reproduced on-line include arrest warrants. One document, translated into English, was sent to Ba’ath Party and security operatives from Damascus, calling for the immediate arrest of “especially those inciting demonstrations” and “members of the coordination committees who organize demonstrations.” “Clean every sector of those wanted people,” the directive orders. Another document translated into English is a request from the Ministry of Interior for information extracted during interrogations of “detainees who incited protests and those who had contacts with foreign bodies.” (See: https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/06/12/inenglish/1528799235_796657.html)

Eventually, in February 2012, Barakat felt he had been discovered. He ransacked the office and grabbed hundreds of additional documents, including minutes of Crisis Cell meetings, and then quickly fled over the border.

What happened to the tens of thousands of protesters that Barakat said were “targeted?” The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that 80,000 Syrians have disappeared after being detained by the government. In 2015, Human Rights Watch and the Euro-Med Monitor for Human Rights estimated that 65,000 had been forcibly detained by the government, a figure that is not inconsistent with the updated SNHR estimate. Of the 65,000 who were abducted, 58,148 were civilians. Comrades can read an August 2015 report here, with short biographies of well-known political activists and intellectuals who have

**Exhibit D: Hangings without fair trials**

What was the fate of all those people? In 2015, Amnesty International issued a report, based on interviews with 84 former prison guards and prisoners who were witnesses, which concluded that from 5000 to 13,000 prisoners were secretly hanged at the notorious Saydnaya prison from the earliest months of the uprising until 2015.

The report’s author, Nicolette Waldman, wrote: “Before they were hanged, victims were condemned to death in a two to three-minute hearing. The death sentence was signed by the minister of defence, who was deputized to sign by President Assad. It is inconceivable that all of the top officials did not know about it. This was a policy of extermination.”

**Exhibit E: Corpses show signs of torture, starvation**

And what of the prisoners who were not hanged but were killed by other means—torture, beatings, starvation, rape, medical neglect—in Assad’s dungeons? Who were the nameless people whose crumpled bodies were taken from the prisons and dumped into mass graves on the outskirts of Damascus—generally before dawn most Tuesday mornings?

A clue to their fate was revealed when the largest collection of evidence of the horrible conditions in Syrian prisons came to light. In 2014, a defector code-named “Caesar” left Syria with photographic images of over 6,700 corpses of people who had died in the prisons. Between 2011 and 2013, Caesar’s job as a police photographer was to photograph and archive the bodies from various prisons and two Damascus “hospitals” (really torture centers). He smuggled over 53,000 images out of Syria on discs and thumb drives until he defected to Europe. In time, the collection of photos was given to Human Rights Watch, which was able to verify a sampling of 27 of the corpses by comparing them to living photos of activists who had been detained by the regime.

HRW conducted extensive investigations into the circumstances of the detentions, and spoke to family members and witnesses. Many of the corpses displayed evidence of starvation, infection, and torture. By 2016, about 730 of the victims in Caesar’s photos had been identified.

Bashar Assad has been questioned about the photographs on several occasions. Last year, in a Yahoo News interview, Assad referred to them as “just propaganda, just fake news.” But in July 2018, investigators who are reviewing the regime documents in our **Exhibit C** said that some of the documents verify Caesar’s photos. Apparently, the investigators found names and numbers that match in both photos and documents. They believe that the links are compelling enough that they could eventually lead to prosecutions of some officers of the regime who are now in Europe. For an interesting report, with interviews, see: https://www.channel4.com/news/syrias-disappeared-new-evidence-that-military-leaders-knew-of-torture

**Exhibit F: Regime documents reveal deaths of the “disappeared”**

Finally, in recent weeks, even the Syrian government has released evidence verifying that many prisoners met a horrific end in the prisons. Partly in response to international pressure, the regime quietly updated the civil registries of towns around the country—changing the status of hundreds of people who had been unaccounted for while in detention to the category of “deceased due to natural causes.”
Whether these individuals died solely as the result of natural causes, like disease or the frequently claimed “heart attack,” however, has been challenged. For example, Muadamiyat al-Sham, a town of 50,000 in the Damascus countryside, has been notified of the deaths in prison of 500 of its former residents. Among them, was Yahya Shurbaji, a non-violent democracy activist, who was recorded as dying at the notorious Saydnaya prison and torture center on Jan. 15, 2013, almost two years after he was detained. But the fact that three other political detainees died there on the same date puts the allegation that they all died of natural causes into question.

Terror bombing of civilian neighborhoods

Of course, documenting the horrors of the prisons and torture centers only lifts the curtain on one element of repression in Assad’s Syria. Most civilian deaths occurred not because of arrests but because of the relentless bombing of populated areas by Syrian and Russian aircraft. It was estimated this year by the Syrian Observatory that pro-Assad forces were responsible for 85 percent of the civilian casualties during the war—with only 15 percent caused by the combination of ISIS, the U.S., and the rebels.

During Socialist Action’s pre-convention discussion in 2016, Comrade Mackler and a few comrades who agreed with his position on Syria not only minimized the amount of civilian deaths and destruction but insisted that it was primarily due to what they called “collateral damage”—that is, the unavoidable deaths that occur when civilians are in the firing line of military action. Moreover, Comrade Mackler maintained, by way of analogy, that even Trotsky’s Red Army killed some civilians during the Civil War in Russia. It is true, of course, that as the Bolsheviks struggled to hold onto power, the revolutionary army and political police (the Cheka) was forced to meet the White Terror with the so-called Red Terror. Numbers of anti-Bolshevik fighters and saboteurs, kulaks (rich peasants) who were withholding their grain, army deserters, and even striking workers were arrested and executed. I’m sure most comrades are aware, however, that Trotsky never waged a purposeful campaign of terror against entire cities, killing tens of thousands of non-combatants, obliterating whole neighborhoods with barrel bombs (filled with nails, oil, or chemicals and designed especially to kill people), or attempting to starve the inhabitants into submission—as Assad has done.

I do not have the space or the time in this already long Resolution to document the extent of the destruction and civilian casualties caused by the Assad regime. But the internet contains many photos and videos (including drone shots and “before & after” shots) of the destroyed sections of Aleppo and other cities. Comrades might also be interested in watching the series of short videos that CNN journalist Clarissa Ward made a couple of years ago, “Undercover in Syria,” made in bombed-out rebel-held areas of the country. See: https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/14/middleeast/syria-aleppo-behind-rebel-lines/index.html

The Assad regime, true to form, blames the bombed-out cities—pock-marked with demolished shells of hospitals, schools, and mosques—on actions by the “terrorists.” One measuring stick of whether the rebels were guilty of destroying the cities can be seen by looking at contemporary maps of Aleppo. It can be seen that the heaviest damage, except for that in the battle-scarred Old City, corresponds almost exactly with the neighborhoods that were held by rebel forces in the summer of 2016. These areas were victims of bombing by Russian and Syrian aircraft. The wealthier western and central areas of the city, which remained loyal to Assad, suffered only light damage. MAPS BELOW:
(KEY: Red = regime areas; green = rebel areas; brown = disputed border areas; yellow = Kurdish-held areas)

Government in rebel areas
Comrade Mackler asked rhetorically in the July 20, 2016, issue of *Socialist Action* newspaper: “Dare we assert that the imperialist-occupied portions of Syria—at one point some 50 percent or more of the country—represent a fundamental violation of the right of oppressed nations to self-determination?”

While it may be true that at the high point of the insurgency, oppositional forces administered around half the territory of the country, neither the United States nor other any other imperialist country had much to do with it. Supplying light arms and a handful of anti-tank missiles to a few selected militias, plus the probable undercover presence of a few CIA agents and special ops, hardly constituted an “imperialist occupation” of half the country.

The reality of life behind rebel battle lines was far more complex than *Socialist Action* newspaper admitted to with its “imperialist occupation” mythology. Several million people lived in rebel areas, raised their families, harvested crops or conducted their businesses, went to school, and served on local governmental boards. Relatively few were militia fighters—let alone U.S.-paid “terrorists.”

And likewise, there was no rigid division between the period of organizing mass protests and the period of armed struggle. Numerous articles in the bourgeois media, as well as accounts in books and on the internet, underscore the fact that civilian mobilizations and political organizing continued for years throughout the country, even though war was raging at the same time.

As officials of the old regime withdrew from towns and villages, grassroots forces—courts, elected councils, and administrative committees and officials—took their place in order to provide services to the population. The downside to the grassroots character of these bodies was that most governmental functions were carried out on a strictly local basis. Organizations like the Syrian National Coalition and the Local Coordinating Councils tried to provide coordination between localities, but little semblance of a unified alternative state apparatus was ever built to govern large blocks of territory—at least, until the Islamic State (ISIS) stepped in. It was even difficult to set up bodies to collect taxes, which made some areas reliant on aid from UNICEF and foreign NGOs, or from Islamic donors abroad.

The noose grew much tighter, of course, when the Syrian government and its allies began to blockade food supplies from reaching many towns and cities and to bomb them relentlessly. Assadist troops and allied militias pursued a scorched-earth policy, burning fields of grain used to feed the people. In those circumstances, the normal functions of local government in providing water and sanitation, schools, bakeries, transport, etc., were stretched to include relief and rescue operations, and in repairing and maintaining bombed-out hospitals and schools or relocating them into cellars or other relatively sheltered areas.

The genesis of the alternative governments was often in the protest committees that had been set up in many areas during the early months of 2011. Very soon after the demonstrations had first broken out, the network of Local Coordinating Councils was set up by activists—including radical students and leftists—who perceived the need to coordinate protest actions and forge clear demands throughout the country. Then, after the regime had withdrawn from many areas, the struggle committees often morphed into administrative bodies working to provide necessary services. Later, after the movement had become militarized, and the rebellion had spread to broader areas of the country, oppositional militias also participated in setting up local governments. In some cases, friction or conflict arose between the civilian-based local councils that were already in place and rival groupings created by the militias, particularly the Islamist-based militias.

Law courts were usually the first alternative governmental institutions to be set up in local areas when the rebels took over. The courts were seen as necessary to adjudicate everyday disputes and criminal matters, as well as to decide disputes between the various
rebels, such as how to divide caches of weapons they had seized or areas of control. There were often few experienced judges or lawyers to take the place of the old Assadist judiciary. For that reason local sheikhs (tribal leaders), who were versed in Sharia law, were often appointed as judges. Some courts applied Syrian civil law, but that was generally supplanted by some version of Sharia as Islamist militias took hold in many districts. In time, many courts, such as the ones in Aleppo, were able to gain independence of the militias. There was an effort to install a general court system that would employ the Unified Arab Code—a legal code based on Sharia that many countries, such as Turkey, employ.

Some five years after the start of the anti-Assad upsurge, several hundred villages, towns, and cities—perhaps 400 to 700, according to Syrian exile and author Leila al-Shami—were still ruled by committees in opposition to the Assad regime.

The major example of a city ruled by popular committees and local self-defense units was the eastern portion of Aleppo, home to the city's working-class and the shacks of migrant poor peasants—containing as many as 300,000 people. Aleppo was first liberated in July 2012, but the insurgents' ammunition soon ran out, some of the fighters squabbled among themselves, and ISIS was able to take advantage of the stalemate to enter the city. In January 2014, a mass popular rebellion—what Leila al-Shami calls the "revolution within the revolution"—took place, as armed people swept ISIS out of all of western Syria, including Aleppo. From 2014 until the end of 2016, when the besieged and ravaged city was finally occupied by Assadist troops, Aleppo was managed by local committees, all under the coordination of the Municipal Council of Aleppo. For a long while, until Assadist bombing made normal functioning impossible, political and cultural life flourished—with independent newspapers and radio stations, health care projects, basement schools, and theatre groups.

"Islamization” of the struggle

Earlier sections of this resolution have already pointed out some of the factors behind the meteoric rise of Islamic-oriented militias within the anti-Assad struggle. To summarize, they include:

1) The prevailing conservative and religious beliefs of the rural and small-town population in parts of Syria where the rebellion took hold.
2) Many militias saw an advantage in taking in Islamic beliefs and goals in order to attract funding from wealthy Islamic benefactors and states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
3) Due to the drawback of the Assad regime from providing social services and adequate schools, the mosques and madrasas took on many of those functions, which increased the standing of the Muslim clergy among the poor population.
4) Since the regime banned most political meetings, the mosques were often used as organizing centers for the protests.
5) Since working-class organizations such as independent trade unions and political parties were prohibited, working-class ideology and organization could not be widely disseminated. Islamic teachings were able to take up the slack.
6) The Assad regime worked to ratchet up religious sectarianism. It facilitated the entry of radical Islamists into the country from Iraq and even freed a number of them from prison, while jailing secular political activists.

It is worth noting that the rise of Islamism as a political force was a phenomenon that took place throughout the Middle East during recent decades. In the period through the 1970s and probably into the 1980s, the nationalist movements in the region were heavily influenced by socialist and Marxist ideas. This was due to the historical legacy of a strong
working-class, socialist, and Stalinist movement throughout the colonial and neo-colonial world.

In addition, military and economic aid from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block helped frame the character of many of the liberation movements and nationalist regimes. Assad’s security apparatus, for example, received training by the East German Stasi. Obviously, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the cut-off of aid eliminated this influence. At that point, proponents of Islamic ideology, who had considerable sources of funding, were able to step into the political breach, attracting many disaffected youth to the madrasas.

Some commentators, such as Christopher Phillips in “The Battle for Syria,” believe that the fall of the USSR—and the revelations that were circulating at the time of the wretched conditions that had existed within the Soviet bloc—was of key importance in causing broad sectors of rebellious Middle Eastern youth to reject socialism and Marxism. I think, however, that Phillips has the equation backwards: Middle Eastern activists became disenchanted with the Stalinist Communist Parties—and with ideas that they took to be representative of Marxism—primarily because of their long and ugly experience with the Stalinists in the Middle East itself. The Stalinists’ repeated sell-outs of national movements, coddling of Israel, support for military dictators like Hafez Assad, and ineffective reformist perspectives caused many Middle Eastern nationalists to turn away from them.

This coincided, of course, with a number of spectacular victories by radical Islamic groupings who gave the superficial appearance of effectively fighting both U.S. imperialism and the cynicism and corruption of the Middle Eastern regimes. The victory of Muslim clerics in Iran in 1979, and the ability of the mass movement there to stand up to the United States, also inspired many young people. A major armed victory was the expulsion of Soviet troops from Afghanistan by the mujahedeen—ironically with the help of the United States. The mujahedeen became the nucleus of a loose peripatetic grouping that soon became al-Qaeda—which later gave birth to ISIS.

Politicized Islamism—including that of the most reactionary variety—will continue to contend for the hearts and minds of the Syrian people who seek change, at least for the foreseeable future. But of course, theological discourse cannot provide an effective answer to the grave economic and political problems that the Syrian people face. It will take a revival of the militant working-class movement, perhaps in strike action or in a resurgence of pro-democracy protests, to begin to provide a counterweight to the attraction that Islamism now holds for many of the Syrian masses. We can be hopeful that a class-struggle leadership will grow out of that struggle, which begins to investigate and utilize the methods and program of the revolutionary socialist movement.

The radical Islamists lack a program that provides the far-reaching and fundamental objectives that are necessary to satisfying the yearning of the Syrian masses for democracy and economic justice. Such objectives require the overthrow of capitalism, and only the revolutionary socialist movement can provide an effective program to accomplish that. By means of a methodology to guide the broad masses in struggle (transitional demands), a revived socialist movement can supersede the attraction that radical Islamists have had on sections of the population, especially rebellious youth.

In the meantime, it is fruitless to look to Assad’s army and its foreign allies to effectively combat reactionary Islamism. The destruction wrought by the Assadists only strengthened the hand of ISIS. During the war, the most effective fighters against these reactionary forces, both of the ISIS and the al-Nusra variety, were the grassroots committees of citizens in opposition-governed areas, together with the FSA and other non-sectarian militias. Those were the people who pushed ISIS back in the 2014 period, although their lack of weaponry and the effects of continual Assadist and Russian bombing weakened them to the point that ISIS was able to stage a resurgence. In the postwar future, we should continue to look to the
beleaguered Syrian people, those in the refugee camps or trying to rebuild their shattered villages and cities, to provide leadership against any comeback by ISIS.

**Did the U.S. “create” or “fight alongside” ISIS?**

How did ISIS arise, and who was responsible? As pointed out above, the Socialist Action 2018 Draft Political Resolution makes the claim: “... U.S. forces often operate in consort with and alongside of the jihadist forces of Al Qaida and ISIS, which it deploys to advance its regime change objectives in Syria.” Jeff Mackler’s articles in Socialist Action often made the same allegation. In February 2018, he wrote, “In point of fact, the U.S. created ‘the extremist’ threat in Iraq, ISIS, with the objective of overthrowing the government of that country.” Elsewhere he wrote that ISIS is the “U.S. secret weapon in Syria.”

Did the U.S. “create” ISIS to overthrow the Iraqi government? No, it did not. Islamic State emerged from a small group of militants fighting against the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and operating under the name of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Many of the initial cadre spent time in U.S.-run prisons in Iraq; under those conditions of extreme suffering and isolation, they were able to indoctrinate new recruits and build their networks. There too, a merger took place between Salafist (ultra-conservative Islamist) militants and former Baathist officers from Saddam Hussein’s army. The captured Iraqi military personnel brought military know-how and professionalism into the new organization.

The group later received an infusion of recruits from among Sunnis who wanted to fight the Shi’ite-dominated U.S. puppet government in Baghdad. Foreign Islamist radicals and adventurers—many of whom had been hardened on other battlefronts, such as Afghanistan—also joined the mix. The group waged guerrilla warfare against the U.S. occupation; in 2004-2005, their principal target became the Shi’ites. With captured weaponry and a swell of recruits, the group was able to seize and hold territory, and eventually entire cities—which in turn increased its resources.

Assad’s regime before 2011 worked to facilitate the operation of the AQI against the U.S. presence in Iraq. Syria opened its borders for foreign Islamists to easily enter Iraq in order to join al-Qaeda, and allowed the use of Syrian territory as a safe zone for al-Qaeda operatives to fall back in. At one point, the U.S. and the Iraqi government managed to push the AQI almost entirely back into Syria, but the movement was able to rebound.

In the first years of the civil war in Syria, ISIS operatives crossed the border in the other direction—from Iraq into Syria. At the beginning, before its takeover of eastern Syria in 2014, ISIS militants began a patient process of proselytizing—infiltrating poor neighborhoods and trying to win over groupings and individuals who were feeling disaffected, perhaps frustrated with the pace of victories against the regime. ISIS also tried to gain favor with various Sunni tribal leaders, giving them money and favors.

After its successful offensive of June 2014 in Iraq, which enabled ISIS to fill its arsenal with heavy weapons that it had captured from the U.S.-supplied Iraqi army, ISIS had gained enough strength to defeat the FSA and other local militias in Syria and it soon consolidated its “caliphate” on Syrian soil.

The Assad regime, of course, had helped to till the ground in which ISIS could thrive, through its actions aimed at increasing the sectarian nature of the pro-democracy revolt. Shabeeha thugs often mocked Sunni beliefs and targeted Sunnis for violent abuse in order to increase their resentment against other religious groupings.

The Assad regime also facilitated the rise of ISIS in Syria by largely refraining from military operations against it, at least in the first years after ISIS arrived on the scene. The regime recognized that the more immediate threats to its rule were the pro-democracy
rebels, who had popular support and governed large areas of the country adjacent to those held by the Damascus regime. And so, the government’s limited firepower was best used, as they saw it, to recapture those rebel areas. In regard to dealing with ISIS, it was “live and let live,” at least for a while. Assad was content to let ISIS sit in its captured “caliphate” in the eastern part of the country, while postponing a showdown until much later. As long as ISIS stayed clear of Assadist territory in the west, the Syrian regime preferred to allow ISIS to help Assad’s cause by fighting it out with the other insurgent groupings.

The regime also purchased oil and gas from ISIS-controlled fields and facilities on a regular basis, which proved to be one of the major sources of funding for ISIS in Syria. Russian-Syrian businessman George Haswani’s gas plant in Taqba appears to have been operated jointly by ISIS and the Assad regime. Media sources such as the London Telegraph and the Financial Times reported on this development.

Comrade Mackler alleged in several of his articles that Syrian government forces, along with the Russians, had done the bulk of the fighting against ISIS in Syria. In February of this year, for example, he wrote that ISIS was “largely defeated at the hands of the Syrian government army, which lost 50,000 soldiers in this effort, a quarter of its fighting force, aided by its invited allies—Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah...”

The claims are difficult to verify; I can find no support for them in the news media. The only reference I can find for the allegation is an article by British journalist Robert Fisk that appeared in the Independent back in October 2015, and which Comrade Mackler cited in his Socialist Action article of January 2016. In fact, Fisk gave the more precise figure of 56,000 Syrian army deaths at the hands of ISIS. However, Fisk named no sources for his figure of 56,000; he merely stated that it was “an official secret” that he somehow became privy to.

Robert Fisk is a courageous reporter, who has traveled at great personal danger into Syrian battle zones, but he writes most of his articles while embedded with Assadist troops and specializes in tidbits gained in interviews with Assadist officials. While Fisk has acknowledged in his articles the reality of barrel bombs and government torture chambers, he nevertheless writes in accordance with the Assadist lingo of “liberating” the cities from “terrorists.” Due to his myopic reporting, many of Fisk’s claims about Syria should be taken with a grain of salt.

In this particular article, Fisk attributed the “56,000 deaths” of Syrian Army soldiers to ISIS for no other reason than because he believed that the Free Syrian Army was too ineffectual to have caused them. But neither Fisk nor Mackler cite any specific battles between the Assadists and ISIS in 2014-2015 to have accounted for over 50,000 deaths. In fact, relatively few clashes took place—maybe seven or eight of any significance over the stretch of those two years. Comrades can see a list of battles between the Syrian Arab Army and ISIS from 2013-2015 in Wikipedia; the casualty figures for government troops, gleaned from a number of news sources, are imprecise but seem to indicate a death total of a couple thousand at most—not 56,000. In 2016, and especially 2017, the Syrian government stepped up their attacks on ISIS, especially in the two attempts to regain Palmyra (in which a couple of hundred Syrian soldiers were killed); but still the figure of 50,000 Syrian Army dead seems excessive. (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_and_battles_involving_ISIL)

What about the notion that ISIS is fighting “in consort with and alongside” U.S. forces? The concept is highly unlikely on several counts. For one thing, ISIS’s organizational and military methods were forged in combat against the Americans, their leaders were imprisoned and tortured by the Americans, and in the recent period they were being bombed to smithereens by the Americans. By what stretch of the imagination could one imagine that ISIS would work together with the United States to counter Assad at the same time that they saw themselves in a combat to the death against the United States?
Moreover, the ideology of ISIS, as well as al-Qaeda, speaks against such an alliance. ISIS sees the Western governments, along with the apostate Shi’ites, as their main enemies. That is the core of their teaching. If they were seen as somehow working in consort with the U.S., they would probably lose most of their most dedicated adherents.

As a matter of fact, it is against the iconoclastic and isolationist ideology of ISIS to work in alliance with any foreign governments or military forces. Unlike, for example, the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISIS even refuses (at least in principle) to enter into negotiations with other combatants. According to numerous proclamations and manifestos, ISIS at its height saw itself as the one and only legitimate state in the region. All others were imposters, and their territory was open ground for war and agitation. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared in 2014, “The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph’s authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas.” All militia groups, all other states, must bow down to ISIS!

From time to time, of course, ISIS did fight in conjunction with various rebel militias in Syria, but those tactical alliances never lasted very long, and ISIS frequently turned around and attacked its former allies. And ISIS also had commercial arrangements with the Damascus regime, as mentioned above in regard to oil sales. Yet a military pact between ISIS the United States is more far fetched—unless, in unlikely circumstances, ISIS were forced to do so under extreme duress.

In several articles, Comrade Mackler alleged that the United States worked to help put ISIS forces into position to go into combat against Syrian government troops. In the February 2018 edition of Socialist Action, he wrote, “Contrary to the arrogant imperialist braggart, Tillerson, the impending defeat of ISIS forces was qualitatively more a product of the resistance of the Syrian government and its invited allies than it was to the uninvited U.S. invaders and their selective bombing campaigns. Indeed, as long as ISIS forces proceeded south with the aim of capturing the Syrian capital of Damascus, they were allowed to proceed virtually unhindered by U.S.-allied forces.”

Unfortunately, Comrade Mackler provides no specifics to back up his claim that the U.S. purposefully allowed ISIS to move toward Damascus, making it very difficult to judge the validity of his allegation. To cite an opposed view, The New York Times, in a Feb. 4, 2018, article on the matter, quotes a U.S. military officer who blames the infiltration of ISIS into the Damascus area on laxness by the Syrian government and the Russians: “In December, Col. Ryan Dillon, the chief spokesman for the American-led military campaign in Iraq and Syria, said in a briefing with Pentagon reporters: ‘Syrian regime commanders in eastern Syria suggest that ISIS fighters’ from the Middle Euphrates River Valley ‘may have slipped through porous Syrian and Russian defenses to arrive in areas near Damascus.’

“As asked late last month by The New York Times about indications that as many as 1,000 fighters and family members had fled the Euphrates River area just in recent days, Colonel Dillon’s command replied in a statement: ‘We know that the Syrian regime has given ISIS the leeway to travel through their area of operations, but we cannot confirm any alleged incidents or operations that are taking place outside our area of operations.’"

Of course, we can never take the press briefings of a U.S. military mouthpiece as the true account of what might have happened on the battlefront. The U.S. military lies constantly. It is enough to state that documentation of instances in which the U.S. let ISIS members escape in order to allow them to harass the Assad regime is quite rare—if it exists at all. In searching for documentation, I collected a score of articles from The New York Times, Reuters, and other news sources that deal with instances in which the U.S. did allow ISIS fighters and their families to pass through allied lines, or refrained from bombing them. However, it is not evident that those incidents took place in order to allow the ISIS militants to fight Assad.
In one case, for example, in September 2017, the U.S. terminated its bombing runs against a group of ISIS members and their families at the request of the Russian government—which was acting on behalf of the Syrian government and its allied Hezbollah militia, in order to facilitate a prisoner swap they had in the works with ISIS (see The New York Times, Sept. 15, 2017). The ISIS grouping was escorted on its journey to Deir al-Zour province by Hezbollah militants (see the Reuters dispatch, Aug. 28, 2017).

And on several occasions, as the London Telegraph reported in June, the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) engineered prisoner exchanges with ISIS, allowing several dozen ISIS members and their wives and children to be set free.

Comrade Mackler is specific, however, about one other case. In July 2017, he wrote, “A June 10 New York Times article, for example, noted that U.S. forces in Raqqα were attacking ISIS from the North, East and West, but not the South. ISIS forces were allowed to evacuate Raqqα, weapons and military gear in tow, heading south along the Euphrates Valley toward Deir Al Zour, where obviously they might be useful in assisting the ISIS attempt to blockade Syrian forces in the city.”

Actually, The New York Times article that Mackler cites does not provide the descriptions or come to the conclusions that he ascribes to it. Writer Anne Barnard piece merely stated that “there are signs” that the Syrian Democratic Forces, led by Kurdish PYD militias and supported by the U.S.—in order to be able to “take Raqqα without an all-out fight”—were considering letting “more Islamic State fighters escape to the south. And their leaders have voiced ambitions to follow the fight south to Deir al-Zour.” The force that she was writing about, with “ambitions” to fight in Deir al-Zour, was the SDF—not ISIS. Her point was that if Kurds in the SDF decided to march south toward Deir al-Zour, they would be fighting in Sunni Arab-majority territory, where Kurds might not be welcomed.

However, further reports soon appeared on this issue, and it appeared that an exodus of ISIS fighters from Raqqα, similar to the one that Barnard said was being contemplated in June 2017, actually did take place several months later. (An interesting BBC report on the event, with video, maps, and photographs, is here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret )

In October 2017, the fighters were allowed take their weapons and to cross without hindrance through the southern desert toward the border with Iraq. The U.S. insisted it was not involved in the negotiations to free the ISIS militants, though there should be little doubt that it knew about it; the U.S. tracked their bus and truck caravan by air during their whole journey. The story gained momentum in the press in late 2017 after a Turkomen commander in the SDF, Talal Silo, defected to Turkey and then charged the SDF and the Kurdish YPG with having made the “secret deal” with ISIS.

How many ISIS members were allowed to escape? Robert Fisk said at least 275. BBC News correspondent Quentin Sommerville, who was at the scene, said 250 fighters plus 3500 family members, and he confirmed from witnesses that they were armed and that the group included some English and French-speaking foreigners.

Were 250 fighters, travelling in buses and trucks with their wives and children, able to mount a significant campaign against Assad’s troops who were besieged at Deir al-Zour? No, that would have been impossible, since the Syrian army had broken the Deir al-Zour siege a month earlier. Media sources speculate that some of the ISIS people involved in the escape crossed into Iraq, while others spread throughout Syria, or were even smuggled into Turkey. Nor is the degree to which the U.S. participated in the deal, if it did at all, entirely clear.

And so, it turns out that the report of the permitted escape of ISIS members from Raqqα, which was reported as fact in Socialist Action newspaper (July 2017), never really happened! It was only three months later that a slightly similar incident took place. This
underlines the importance in our Syria coverage of using *verifiable* sources as a foundation for our articles, since we cannot be on the scene ourselves. Even when using sources that might seem reliable, it is necessary to carefully fact check and cross-check with other sources in order to ascertain the truth.

One has to be particularly careful about referencing blog posts on the topic of U.S.-ISIS collusion. The blogosphere has gone wild with fairy stories alleging that the U.S. created ISIS, has collaborated with ISIS, funds ISIS, refuses to engage them in battle, and so on. The right-libertarian conspiracy site Global Research, for instance, has dozens of articles on the theme of U.S.-ISIS collusion; the founder of the site, Michel Chossudovsky, has made a specialty of writing on the topic—though much of it is utter nonsense.

Other pro-Assad conspiracy blogs, such as Mint Press News, Moon Over Alabama, and 21st Century Wire, also harp on the alleged U.S.-ISIS partnership, basing their conclusions on a string of half-facts and innuendo. The core of most of their sensationalized stories on Syria, in fact, can be traced back to statements by the Syrian government, or to articles that first appeared in the media sponsored by the governments of Russia (i.e., RT and Sputnik News) and Iran (i.e., IRNA and PressTV). A critique of these blog articles is outside the scope of this Resolution. However, it might be worth mentioning, by way of example, a piece in 21st Century Wire by Stephen Lendman, which contained a detailed “report” of how the U.S. had refused to conduct airstrikes in November 2016 against an ISIS convoy fleeing Abu Kamal, which the Russians and the Syrian army were also pursuing. It soon turned out that the report, which had originated with the Russian Defense Ministry and posted on Facebook and in tweets, was doctored. A reporter for the *Daily Beast* discovered that blurred photos supposedly of the Abu Kamal operation, which the Russians had posted, had really been taken from a *video game*. Other shots were discovered to be old file photos of the air war in Iraq. After they had been caught flat-footed, the Russian government quickly deleted the Facebook “report”—but blogs such as 21st Century Wire still keep the fakery in their archives as if it were the gospel truth.

**IV. The socialist program**

**The right of oppressed nations to self-determination**

An oppressed nation state in the semi-colonial world has the right to defend itself when attacked by imperialism. Bashar Assad—despite the repression and war that his government has unleashed upon the Syrian people—is head of state of a country in which the United States (and Britain, France, and other imperialist countries) have militarily intervened. In that regard, our revolutionary duty is to support the Syrian regime’s right of self-determination, and thus defend its struggle against imperialism. In the United States, it is our responsibility to build an antiwar movement that demands, “U.S. Hands Off Syria.”

That position reflects the proud tradition of revolutionary socialism, from the time of the Bolsheviks and the Third International, and through the founding of the Fourth International, in supporting the self-determinations of neo-colonial countries against imperialism. When Abdel Nasser’s Egypt, for example, was attacked by the imperialists and Israel over his nationalization of the Suez Canal, we defended Nasser—despite the authoritarian nature of his semi-military populist regime. When Argentina, ruled by a junta of murderous generals, was attacked by Britain, which sought to maintain control over the Malvinas Islands, we sided with Argentina against Britain. When China was invaded by Japan in the 1930s, the Trotskyist movement sided with China against imperialist Japan—despite the rule of the butcher Chiang Kai-Shek in China.
This Resolution, nevertheless, has tried to demonstrate that U.S. intervention into Syria has been a relatively minor aspect of the war in that country. The major axis of the war, from 2011 until today, has consisted of the destructive and counter-revolutionary drive of the Assad regime to win back political control of the country from oppositional forces. The amount of military aid and training that the U.S. provided to rebel militias (including Saudi aid that was facilitated by the CIA) was not sufficiently large to have affected the direction or scope of their defense against Assad’s war—although the armaments probably contributed to some of the rebel successes, especially in the 2015 period.

This Resolution has also attempted to show that Assad’s stated reasons for initiating the war—that he was compelled to defend Syria against terrorism and an unseen foreign conspiracy—was a sham. The Syrian people were not in the streets, putting their lives at risk against Assad’s snipers, because of the CIA but because of their own heartfelt convictions. They armed themselves because of their perceived need to defend themselves against Assadist troops and the Shabeeha thugs—not because the CIA ordered them to.

Of course, ISIS and other reactionary Islamist forces did enter the conflict and after several years were able to take over, distort, and defeat the popular struggle in many areas. But local people, together with more democratically minded militias, fought valiantly against ISIS. For a while, in 2014, they were able to turn back ISIS significantly. Unfortunately, Assad’s army, instead of waging a determined military campaign against ISIS in those crucial early days, directed its guns against the popular struggle instead.

While we defend the Assad regime against imperialism, we do not suspend our political criticisms of the Assad regime. We especially cannot defend his war, prisons, and torture directed against the section of the Syrian people (probably a majority at the beginning) who opposed his strong-arm methods and demanded that he step down from power. And we support the right of the Syrian people to oppose the regime by whatever means necessary.

It should be likewise obvious that we would have had no confidence in the Assad regime to break from imperialism even if it had not conducted the war against the masses of the country. An effective fight against imperialism requires that the working class, armed with a revolutionary program, take the lead. As Trotsky pointed out almost a century ago, a bourgeois government in the neo-colonial world (like that of Assad) will ultimately be compelled to offer concessions to the imperialists. These governments, even the ones headed by military figures who profess to be “socialists,” have proven throughout history to be unable or unwilling to carry out thorough democratic reforms or to remove their economies away from the domination of foreign capital.

Socialist Action has had no difficulty in the past in expressing solidarity with masses of people who are in struggle against oppressive regimes while the country is under attack by imperialism. In the late 1990s, for example, we supported the fight for self-determination by the people of Kosovo against the Serbian regime, at the same time that we led demonstrations against U.S. and NATO bombing of Serbia under the demand, “U.S. Out Now!” Simultaneously, we criticized the Kosovo Liberation Army for accepting training by the CIA and arms from the United States, and pointed out in our press that such aid came with strings attached that presented dangers to the independence struggle of the Kosovars. But we refrained from using that fact to withdraw our solidarity from the struggle. We never insinuated that accepting some U.S. military aid had reduced the justice of Kosovo’s fight, or that the Kosovars had fallen to the position of being mere cogs in the imperialist war against Serbia.

Iran, and then Russia, came into the Syrian war not to ensure self-determination for Syria but to shore up Assad’s tyrannical rule (and to maintain and expand their own interests in the country and the region). Likewise, the bombing of Aleppo and other cities by Russian and Syrian aircraft—with the resulting deaths of thousands of civilians—the Assadist
forces’ burning of crops, starving the population through blockades, driving millions into exile, and other terrorist acts against the Syrian people have contributed in no way to the fight for self-determination against imperialism. Although oppositional local governments had sprung up in something like 600 or 700 towns and cities of Syria, they were smashed, often by Russian air strikes and the assault of Iranian and Hezbollah troops. If anything, Assad’s war has further weakened and destabilized the country, and made it even more of a prey for imperialist intervention. It is difficult to speak of the right of “self-determination” having been ensured when over half the country’s population has been uprooted from their homes—due in no small way to Russia’s air war. (Obviously, the U.S. is just as guilty of war crimes in its bombing raids that resulted in the near-leveling of the city of Raqqa.) Likewise, any hopes for a revival of the class struggle in Syria have been set back since a significant proportion of the country’s working class has been killed or dispersed, often living in refugee camps abroad.

Now that the war appears to be drawing to a close—except for the impending murderous assault on the province of Idlib by Assad’s army, aided by Russian airpower—the lingering presence of foreign forces has taken a new significance. Now more than ever, the half-demolished country is up for grabs by foreign and imperialist capital. The capitalists of many countries are jostling with one another for position to extract high profits from a rebuilding Syria, including gaining concessions to Syria’s oil and gas, more hotels for the tourist industry, and so on. Russian investments in Syria were considerable even before the war (some $19.4 billion). It has since extracted additional concessions in the oil fields, and will play a key role in reconstruction contracts when the war is over.

It is hard to say whether Russian armed troops will be permitted to stay on, beyond their naval base at Tartous and their airbase at Hmeimim—both of which are being greatly expanded. It should be obvious that the bases are meant to expand Russian power in the Middle East and guard the Mediterranean and the entrance to the Black Sea; they have nothing to do with ensuring Syrian self-determination. But if Russian soldiers, special ops, and armed contractors are allowed to remain in Syria as well, we might expect they will continue to give Russia an advantage in protecting its assets in the country—i.e., as potential strike breakers and armed guards.

The antiwar movement: “Two lines?”

We should point out all of this in articles in our press, and try to explain in a patient and educational way—not written on large banners in the antiwar movement—why Syria can never achieve self-determination while foreign armies and militias are patrolling its territory. Withdrawing all foreign troops from Syria would be a key step toward allowing the Syrian people to run their own country.

This Resolution does not advocate raising the slogan “Russia Out Now from Syria!” as one to be adopted by the antiwar movement. The antiwar movement today is split over the question of whether the intervention of Russia into the Syrian war has been, in general, a benevolent action or a destructive one. The debate over that question, in fact, has been quite loud and sometimes angry. For that reason, any attempt to argue for the slogan “Russia Out Now from Syria” would cut across the necessity to forge a united antiwar movement that can direct its action against the U.S. government and military.

The idea has been raised in our discussion that the procedure outlined here would be tantamount to presenting “two lines”—one for the antiwar movement and another in our socialist press. A moment’s thought should make clear that it has never been our method, when working in coalitions that are constituted around limited demands and issues, to always place up front the entire perspective of socialists on an issue. Instead, we use a more
transitional approach, carefully distinguishing between more immediate and agitational demands, which are directed toward the struggle at hand, and those that should be reserved for educational use.

If workers are discussing strike action at their plant, for instance, socialists who are involved in the union do not immediately expound on the need for revolutionary factory committees and soviets—although those items are certainly in our more complete program for the workers’ struggle. If we were to declaim on such topics in union meetings, we would be seen as utter crazies, people who were misdirecting the discussion on what needed to be done right then and there. Of course, if we were speaking to workers on an individual basis who were more politically experienced or educated, and perhaps interested in joining the socialist movement, we might bring up the idea of revolutionary workers’ councils and other items from our broader socialist program.

That is the approach that I am outlining here; the question of the need to withdraw foreign troops from Syria is one that we should present in an educational manner; it is not a slogan for action by the antiwar movement.

We can look at history to see how revolutionary socialists approached similar situations. In the Vietnam antiwar movement, the old Socialist Workers Party supported slogans that were principled but that at the same time could unite a broad coalition of forces in action—“U.S. Out Now,” “Bring the Troops Home Now,” and similar slogans. However, the party’s full view went beyond merely opposing an imperialist war—important as that was. We believed that the Vietnam War was a revolutionary struggle. We were for socialist revolution in Vietnam. We supported a victory for the National Liberation Front, although we criticized the Stalinist leadership. In the pages of our party newspaper, The Militant, and in party forums, we tried to educate and convince new people of the soundness of those ideas, and at the same time win them to our party.

Nevertheless, when the ultra-left Spartacist League came to antiwar coalition meetings and argued for the broad group to adopt their slogan of “All Indo-China Must Go Communist,” we pointed out that the slogan, while it might be appropriate as a subheading in a communist newspaper, would be divisive if used as the theme of a united antiwar demonstration.

In an historical example more specific to the issue of whether to support the right of Assad to call on the Russians to aid his cause, we can look back to Afghanistan in the 1980s. When the reformist government in that country was attacked by U.S.-supported Islamist forces, the Soviets came to their aid—but in a brutal fashion, killing many civilians. The Afghans certainly had a right to call on the Soviets, and some socialists in the United States gave support to the Soviet invasion. Socialist Action, on the other hand, while demanding that the U.S. keep its hands off Afghanistan, did not support the Soviet intervention, because it merely escalated the war—as Russia has done so destructively today in Syria.

During that early Afghan war, we stated our point of view in our newspaper and public forums. However, Socialist Action never called on the U.S. antiwar movement to mobilize demonstrations around the demand, “Russia Out of Afghanistan!” The target of the U.S. antiwar movement—then as today—is on U.S. imperialism, not the Russian government.

**Trotsky on China**

In a recent National Committee discussion, two NC members pointed to another event in history, the invasion of China by imperialist Japan in the 1930s. The comrades maintained that even though Chiang Kai-Shek was a bloodstained dictator, like Bashar Assad, Leon Trotsky stated that revolutionary workers in China should join the struggle under Chiang’s command to repel the Japanese forces.
I don’t disagree at all with the general point that the comrades made. The situation of China’s striving for self-determination against an imperialist power had some similarities to that in Syria today—but it’s worth pointing out that there were marked differences as well. Whereas the Syrian conflict is a multi-faceted war, the main element of which has been the war by the Assad regime against a mass rebellion, the main struggle in China was against a full-scale invasion by Japan.

Horrible as the U.S. killings of civilians have been in the fight against ISIS in and around Raqqa, the U.S. has not done anything in Syria on a scale approaching that of the Japanese in China. The Japanese imperialists sent many thousands of troops, bombed and destroyed cities, massacred and kidnapped thousands. In 1931, they occupied the most industrialized portion of the country, Manchuria—which they turned into an outright colony. In 1937, they went on to seize a large part of the rest of China, and even took the capital, Nanking.

The context of Trotsky’s remarks on China in 1937 was to take a stand against sectarians who argued for staying neutral in the war—supporting neither China nor Japan, since China was ruled by a dictator. Trotsky pointed out that China, despite its oppressive government, was an oppressed neo-colonial country, and thus warranted our support against the Japanese colonial invasion. To insist otherwise was “complete political stupidity and even treachery.” He made an analogy with the work of socialists in the American trade-union movement: “It’s like saying that we cannot participate in a strike against Ford because it is led by [AFL head, William] Green. Can we give Green full confidence? No, but we must take part in the strike as the best strikers” (“Internal Bulletin of the Socialist Workers Party, reprinted in “Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37”).

Since Chiang’s government had made some effort to combat Japan (although ineffectually), Trotsky argued that Chinese revolutionary workers should not hold back from the struggle but should fight under the command of Chiang’s army—with the purpose of becoming strong and influential enough within the armed forces and the working class to help lead an overthrow of the Chinese capitalist government.

In a September 1937 essay, “On the Sino-Japanese War,” Trotsky explained, “Of course, we must prepare for the overthrow of Chiang Kai-Shek. If you can, replace him. If you can’t replace him, participate in the fight against Japan while politically fighting against him.”

The same month, Trotsky wrote in a letter to Diego Rivera, “But can Chiang Kai-shek assure the victory? I do not believe so. It is he, however, who began the war and who today directs it. To be able to replace him it is necessary to gain decisive influence among the proletariat and in the army, and to do this it is necessary not to remain suspended in the air but to place oneself in the midst of the struggle.”

Just as Trotsky shamed Chiang for not doing enough to organize for the expulsion of the Japanese invaders, he also roundly denounced Chiang’s efforts to defeat and terrorize a rebelling population—the type of war-making that Assad has been doing in Syria. Trotsky in no way identified Chiang with the interests of the Chinese people, nor did he charge that workers who were in struggle against Chiang’s dictatorship were by their actions sabotaging the struggle against Japan.

Thus, the emphasis of Trotsky’s writings in this particular instance was not primarily geared toward demonstrating that it is permissible to back the dictator of a neo-colonial country in a military struggle against imperialism—although that is a valid point—but to demonstrate how and why Chinese revolutionaries should enter the arena of mass struggle in order to further their work in overthrowing the dictator.

Does Trotsky’s advice to Chinese socialists apply in Syria today? If we had a revolutionary party in Syria, would we advise our comrades to join the Assadist forces in the impending assault on Idlib province? Should we be in the helicopters tossing the barrel bombs onto civilians below? In accord with the arguments I have made in this Resolution, the answer
should be obvious—we would be on the other side of the barricades, together with the local people who are defending their homes, families, and livelihood from the attack by the regime and its foreign allies.

The way forward

Syria requires a rapid end to Assad’s war on the people; only with peace can the Syrian people begin to rebuild their homes and their lives. The demand should be raised worldwide that the refugees be allowed to return to their homes and regain their property (or what’s left of it), without fearing that the Syrian government confiscated it.

Syria must not become another Palestine, with generations of people living in forced exile, and often in extreme poverty, without the right to return to their country, villages, and homes. Likewise, the world should be vigilant against attempts by the Assad regime to impose recriminations—seizing property, detentions, torture, and all the horrible methods it has used in the past—against people that it suspects of having supported the opposition.

Assad, to be sure, still counts on a great deal of popular support. Before the war, it was estimated that close to half the population felt allegiance to the regime. This included many among the minority (non-Sunni Arab) ethnic groupings, the bourgeoisie of the main cities, the new rich created by the regime, government officials and workers, people with ties to the military, and many others. When the democracy movement first arose, not just a few people from those layers wavered in their support for Assad, and joined the protests for reforms. But the ethnic and religious hysteria that the Assad regime fomented, and the violence that it unleashed, pulled many of those people back into the fold of Assad supporters. Living in the bourgeois neighborhoods of Damascus and other cities in the west of Syria that were relatively untouched by the war, with food and other goods still plentiful, and having no access to media sources other than those controlled by the regime, it was much easier for people to believe the government’s insistence that it had to protect them from Israeli-backed terrorists, wild Sunni bandits, and “jihadist” cutthroats.

There is little doubt that additional layers of the population today—including those whose families suffered directly from Assad’s war and repression, and who have only contempt for the regime—have nevertheless come to the conclusion that they would be more or less content to live under the jurisdiction of the Damascus government again, if that helps ensure that the war will come to an end. We can imagine that many will choose dictatorship as a lesser evil to war and death. Many others, however, will make a third choice—remaining in the refugee camps, or if they are lucky, in exile abroad where they have found jobs, until the situation improves in their homeland.

What is certain is that the conditions that gave birth to the protest movement in 2011 have far from improved after seven years of war. If anything, they are much worse, with vast sections of the cities virtually uninhabitable, and industry and agriculture destroyed. Assad might offer a few democratic reforms once the war has come to a close, but we can expect they will be tokens. The security apparatus, the prisons, the entire mechanism of repression are still intact. Truly independent parties and trade unions are still banned. The laws for confiscation of property are even more onerous than they used to be. And the government seems to be targeting political oppositionists with a vengeance.

When peace comes to Syria, it should be a just peace. Public forums in the United States and other countries—sponsored by the labor movement and antiwar and civil liberties forces—can speak to this issue and express solidarity with the struggle of the Syrian people for democratic rights and for economic justice. However, we are against the application of economic sanctions on Syria by the U.S. and other imperialist countries, such as the ones that Obama imposed at the start of the Syrian protests.
The movement for democratic and radical change has suffered a defeat in Syria, although the denouement, the attack on Idlib, is just getting underway. The socialist movement too, which had no mass base of any real size back in 2011 (aside from the pro-Assad Stalinists), has been smashed. Reports state that some left socialists were killed by the regime, and perhaps others escaped into exile.

In time, nevertheless, the class struggle will probably revive inside Syria, and protests for democratic rights will break out once again. But for some years, most political organizing of a radical nature will probably have to take place underground. Syria, of course, is not isolated from political developments in the rest of the world; as the revolutionary socialist movement regains strength worldwide, it will probably gain adherents in Syria as well.

Revolutionaries might ask themselves which Syrian population group would be most receptive to their message. Is it the group who backed Assad during the war, and shut their eyes to the terror bombing and atrocities that were carried out in his name? Is it the bourgeois yuppies who for the last seven years have sat around in cafes in central Damascus, living the good life?

Or is it the jobless workers and poor peasants, the pro-democracy students, the young men who fled the draft, the Syrian Army soldiers who refused to kill their fellow citizens, the grassroots militia and Free Syrian Army members—all of whom were subjected to the regime’s terror and many of whom now live in refugee camps in Idlib, or in Turkey, Jordan, and elsewhere. I think it is the latter grouping who will be most receptive to the program of revolutionary socialism. Such a program will have to offer a comprehensive series of interlocking transitional demands that can speak to the strivings of the masses for democracy, national rights, women’s rights, and economic liberation. It will point to the necessity of those downtrodden masses, under the leadership of a resurgent working class, to take the Syrian state power into their own hands.

In our newspaper and public forums, Socialist Action should express the following positions:

1) We say no to U.S. imperialist intervention in Syria! Withdraw the troops! No bases!
2) Self-determination for the Syrian people! It is up to the people of Syria to determine their own destiny; they are the ones who must lead the fight for democracy and social and economic justice in their country. There can be no liberation for Syria under imperialist rule.
3) The military intervention of Russia, Iran, and the Hezbollah militia has offered nothing progressive or beneficial to the people of Syria—only death and destruction. We likewise reject the efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and other countries in the region to funnel aid to armed groups in Syria, many of which espouse a reactionary fundamentalist credo. The achievement of self-determination for Syria requires an end to all foreign intervention into the country, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops and aircraft.
4) The authoritarian Assad regime has no legitimate claim to represent the people of Syria, having waged a war of terror and ethnic cleansing against large sections of the civilian population, in which many tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives, and millions have been uprooted from their homes. The Assad government is primarily responsible for the social catastrophe that Syria faces today. For that reason, we reject any call for or support to the military victory of pro-Assad forces in the war.
5) It is essential that a future, democratic Syria recognize and protect the rights of all national minorities in that country, and uphold the right of self-determination for oppressed nations such as the Kurds.
6) We believe that full self-determination in Syria, and true social and economic justice, can be ensured only by means of a socialist revolution in that country (and indeed, the entire Middle East). To achieve victory in that fight will require the patient construction of a revolutionary socialist party that is deeply rooted in the organizations and struggles of the Syrian working-class and poor peasant masses.