

CRISIS POLITICS

Syria: A betrayal of Labour's internationalism and solidarity

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For too long the Labour Party has failed Syria. But there are policy measures that Labour could promote which would contribute to a just peace in the country.

My impression about this curious situation is that they simply do not see us; it is not about us at all. Syria is only an additional occasion for their old anti-imperialist tirades, never the living subject of the debate ... Before helping Syrians or showing solidarity with Syrians, the mainstream Western left needs to help themselves.

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For almost six years the people of Syria have been subjected to unimaginable violence. It is estimated that over half a million people have been killed, largely as a result of a vicious aerial campaign that has deliberately targeted civilian populations. Millions are either internally displaced or seeking refuge abroad. The international community has spent this time wringing its hands, making largely empty statements and bemoaning a tragedy that it has done next to nothing to halt. At the end of 2016, in Eastern Aleppo, the Assad regime and its Russian allies engaged in relentless bombing of civilian areas, supplemented by ground assaults by the thugs and looters that comprise the remnants of Assad's 'Syrian Arab Army' and sectarian Shia militias from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. Day after day, Syrian activists in East Aleppo released videos calling, often begging, for the international community

to do something. No action was taken, and by the end of the onslaught, the forced displacement of civilians was talked about as if it was a positive outcome.

Over the course of the pressing humanitarian crisis in Syria, large parts of the Western left, in the name of anti-imperialism, have counselled that nothing should be done. Even those who have responded with well-intentioned humanitarianism to the refugee crisis have, on the whole, neglected to analyse the deeper roots of the crisis, or to appreciate the role that Western countries could have in contributing to a just peace in Syria. The spirit of solidarity and internationalism upon which the left is supposedly founded has been notably lacking. Syrians have been patronised, dismissed and ignored.

Something must be done to address Labour's failure on Syria. This article first analyses the party's response to the current crisis and identifies some of the shortcomings of its approach. It then outlines the policy measures that it could promote in order to contribute to a just peace in the country, one that is based on the demands for freedom and dignity that Syrian civil society continues to make. Finally, the article criticises the intellectual foundations of the broader left's current misguided understanding of what imperialism and anti-intervention mean in relation to the Syrian conflict.

The Revolution Betrayed: Syria and the Left

Labour's lack of a clear stance on Syria is revealed by its disorganised and weak response to various government proposals for UK action. One of the few parliamentarians to see through the rhetorical confusion and to advocate a solution focused on civilian protection and the root causes of the conflict was the late Jo Cox. She reached out across party divides, pushed against lazy thinking, and sought out the opinions not only of foreign policy experts but also of Syrians themselves. It was this near-unique approach to understanding the crisis that helped her to see the failings of the Government's 'ISIS-first' approach, namely the lack of a broader strategy of civilian protection.

The Labour Party's first major mistake on Syria was its opposition to the 2013 vote to launch strikes against Assad's chemical weapons facilities. Miliband's decision to derail the vote was informed largely by a desire to vanquish the memory of the Iraq debacle, which still hangs over British politics in general and the Labour Party in particular, but which, as we argue below, offers a fundamentally false comparison to the situation in Syria. Less interventionist means had obviously failed to address Assad's use of chemical weapons, and the proposal for military intervention was the solution of last resort. The intervention was to be limited to responding to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons; it was not to lead to regime change, or to an open-ended military response to all of the Assad regime's violations of international

law. The Labour Party, however, in killing the Government's motion, contributed to Obama's U-turn from his 'red line' and effectively gave the Assad regime a green light to resume its campaign of brutality against the civilian population alongside its Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese Hezbollah allies. Though it would be foolish to imagine counterfactuals, a limited intervention in 2013 would have drastically changed the situation in Syria, and made Russian and Iranian intervention much less likely.

Labour's failure on Syria was also prominently highlighted in the December 2015 House of Commons debate on extending the UK's airstrikes against ISIS into Syria. In this vote, Labour parliamentarians were split into what was described by Jo Cox as the "'something must be done' brigade" and a "'nothing can be done' sect",² neither of whom properly grasped the depth of the situation and the international action required to bring it to an end.

On the one hand, the iconic head of the 'something must be done' brigade was then-Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn who, speaking and voting against the leader of his party, argued passionately for extending airstrikes against ISIS into Syria. Benn appealed in his argument, to Labour values, stating that 'as a party, we have always been defined by our internationalism. We believe we have a responsibility one to another. We never have, and we never should, walk by on the other side of the road'.³ For all the high rhetoric of Benn's speech, however, and despite the terrible shadow of the recent attacks on Paris, there was something slightly farcical about the debate, which was concerned almost exclusively with a relatively small addition to an already existing war against a brutal, media-savvy, but ultimately secondary evil. As Syrian civil society organisations themselves regularly point out, Assad, not ISIS, is the main problem in Syria. The regime and its allies are responsible for over ninety per cent of the civilian casualties sustained during the war.⁴ The Syrian crisis began as a series of peaceful demonstrations against the brutal and corrupt Assad dictatorship, which responded with bullets and bombs. This violence, and other strategies of the Assad regime, created a vacuum of death and destruction in which terrorism thrived.

Benn did acknowledge in his speech that a political transition in Syria would 'help in the defeat of Daesh'.⁵ He furthermore admitted that 'air strikes alone will not defeat Daesh', but that rather, they would merely give the group 'a hard time, making it more difficult for it to expand its territory'. He failed, however, to make the obvious connection that this meant that the Prime Minister's 'ISIS-first strategy' was not the most sensible course of action.

On the other hand, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn embodied the stance of the 'nothing can be done' sect. To give him credit, he paid greater attention to the need for a resolution to the conflict in Syria and an end to Assad's attacks on civilians. He also correctly noted that 'many more have been killed by the Assad regime than by ISIL itself', something which was easy to forget amongst the cataloguing of ISIS

atrocities by various MPs, including Benn.⁶ However, Corbyn's proposed solution to the conflict in Syria continued to rely on the endless series of failed diplomatic efforts, ignoring the reality that negotiations alone would lead nowhere so long as the Assad regime and its allies were not held to what was agreed at the bargaining table.

Corbyn's obsession with finding a political solution for Syria – one which could have no teeth, as this would be, in his view, 'imperialist' – led him to oppose every suggested action for civilian protection. The escalation of events in East Aleppo in late 2016 offered a window of opportunity for the Labour Party to redeem itself. A city under siege, under brutal bombardment, and in which any semblance of civilian life was obliterated by the Assad and Russian air forces – including schools, hospitals, and bakeries – Aleppo became known as 'Syria's Srebrenica', screaming for international action to protect civilians in the city. Here again, however, the Corbyn camp disappointed. In the 11 October 2016 emergency debate on Aleppo, Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry put forward a ridiculously naive 'plan', suggesting that the Russian and Assad pretext for bombing East Aleppo could be simply removed if fighters of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) – the former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria until recently known as Jabhat al-Nusra – were escorted out of the city by international monitors.⁷ She held up Homs as an example of how local peace deals could be negotiated, despite the fact that this 'deal' had actually involved the forced displacement of civilians.⁸

Thornberry's proposal ignored the fact that Assad and Russia are not seriously interested in fighting terrorism, but rather use terrorism as a pretext to justify their illegal military campaigns. From the mass release of extremists from Syrian prisons in the early days of the Arab Spring, to continued cooperation with ISIS up to the present, Assad has done more than anybody to encourage the growth of terrorism in Syria because it offers a cover for his brutal war.⁹ The regime and its Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese Hezbollah allies have prioritised crushing the moderate opposition over fighting ISIS because they understand that if the situation is presented as a choice between Assad and terrorism, the international community will choose the former.

In the next emergency debate on Aleppo on 13 December 2016, the situation in the besieged part of the city had become even bleaker, and this was reflected in the impassioned representations made by parliamentarians from all sides on the need for the UK to take action. Surprisingly, Thornberry came out in support of UK humanitarian aid drops on besieged East Aleppo, a course of action that the Corbyn camp had thus far refused to entertain.¹⁰ But it was far too late; the Assad and Russian forces had largely destroyed the city. Plans were underway for the forced evacuation of any remaining civilians. In other words, there would soon be no one left in East Aleppo to drop aid to.

Perhaps more alarming than this confused response to the crisis is the number of Assad supporters associated with the current Labour leadership. In July 2015, the

Morning Star, a newspaper Corbyn has repeatedly praised and defended, went so far as to argue 'that the British government should stop trying to resurrect and train the so-called "moderate" armed opposition to Assad, and instead provide aid to the Damascus regime as and when requested'.¹¹ During the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, it drew a great deal of criticism for describing the humanitarian catastrophe as a 'liberation'.¹² The Stop the War Coalition (STWC), of which Corbyn was chairman until he became leader of the Labour Party, continues to provide a platform to Assad apologists. Such, for example, is the case with Kamal Majid, one of STWC's vice-presidents, who urged support for the Assad regime because of its 'long history of resisting imperialism'.¹³ Another STWC vice-president and friend of the Labour leader, Tariq Ali, has accused the White Helmets, the civilian rescue organisation that provides emergency response in opposition-held territories and one of the groups which will receive funding from money raised in memory of Jo Cox, of being an al-Qaeda front operation.¹⁴ Yet another vice-president of this group and friend of the Labour leader, George Galloway, with whom Corbyn sat during the debate on airstrikes to punish Assad's use of chemical weapons, has long been known for his praise of the Syrian dictator.¹⁵

This is not about guilt by association. It is about acknowledging that views that ought to be considered extreme are becoming extremely common within the circles in which some within the Labour Party move. In our 'post-truth' politics, these views circulate widely online and pollute the debate about action in Syria. With this in mind, the next section proposes some means by which the Labour Party can correct the narrative on Syria and push for measures to ensure civilian protection.

What is to be done? An agenda for the Left

The Syrian conflict has created three major crises: the humanitarian crisis within Syria, the flow of refugees into neighbouring countries and the European Union, and the threat posed to the West by ISIS. While the first alone should be reason enough to act, the latter two crises have contributed enormously to the general crisis of the West, from Trump to Brexit, from the Paris attacks to the assassination of Jo Cox, and in the resurgence of the far-right across Europe. The 'hands-off' approach to Syria and the pursuit of a political solution involving endless stage-managed conferences and insincere peace talks, combined with the Government's ISIS-first approach, has seen the situation getting progressively worse. A change in direction is needed, and fast.

The first step for a Labour-inspired strategy on Syria is to set the narrative straight. There is an alarming tendency in some quarters, as we have seen, for people distrustful of Western intervention to assume that Assad has the moral high ground simply because he is the 'victim' of Western 'imperialism'. This stance, however,

critically overlooks the fact that Syria is already a focal point of intervention. Indeed, it is Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria, supported by Hezbollah and sectarian Iraqi militias that is helping to prop up Assad. By the time Russia intervened directly in Syria in September 2015, the Assad regime's army had lost a significant number of troops in battle or to desertion, leaving it at between a third and a half of its original manpower.¹⁶ The current situation in Syria would be drastically different if it were not for foreign military intervention.

At a minimum, Labour should set the narrative straight on Syria. There should be no room for Assad sympathising. There should be no chemical weapons denials. There should be no slandering of the heroic White Helmets. The Labour Party should not tolerate the distortion of a popular revolution for freedom and dignity against a brutal and corrupt dictatorship so that it becomes perceived as a 'terrorist' movement (even if terrorists have taken advantage of the situation). It should be firm and unequivocal in affirming a core set of truths regarding the Syrian popular uprising and in countering pro-Assad propaganda campaigns.

Additionally, even if the Labour Party remains reluctant to support military intervention, there are non-military measures that it should consider endorsing that would help to save civilian lives in Syria. One such measure, humanitarian aid drops into besieged areas, gained initial support from the Labour front bench in the 13 December 2016 emergency parliamentary debate on Aleppo.¹⁷ While this came far too late to save civilians in East Aleppo, Siege Watch reported in its fourth quarterly report in December 2016 that at least 1.3 million civilians remained under siege in thirty-nine different communities across Syria.¹⁸ Labour can therefore still advocate the adoption of this highly limited and purely humanitarian action to save civilian lives in other besieged communities across the country. Aid drops are logistically complex, but they are possible, and are in fact already taking place when Assad permits. The World Food Programme has successfully dropped aid into Assad-held Deir Ezzor, which has been besieged by ISIS since 2015.

Importantly, humanitarian aid drops enjoy widespread international support, as seen in the 17 May 2016 International Syria Support Group statement which called for air bridges and air drops of humanitarian aid if the Assad regime denied humanitarian aid convoys to designated besieged areas past 1 June.¹⁹ This initiative was even endorsed by allies of the regime such as Russia and Iran, although the deadline passed and nothing happened. The right of UN humanitarian agencies and their partners to conduct cross-border and cross-line distribution of humanitarian aid without the Assad regime's consent has furthermore been granted in UN Security Council Resolutions 2165, 2191, 2258, and 2332.²⁰ Conducting humanitarian aid drops, therefore, would not represent a unilateral imposition of the UK's will on Syria. Rather, it would constitute the solution of last resort, supported by international diplomacy, to a pressing humanitarian issue.

Another non-military option that the Labour Party should consider is the use of targeted sanctions, in addition to those already in place, against the Assad regime and its allies.²¹ It is not uncommon for the UK to take economic action against human rights abusers, and the Syrian case is a particularly compelling human rights situation that requires such action. These measures are completely legal, require no military or other intervention in Syria, and assert a degree of pressure upon the regime and its backers by hitting at core economic interests.

Finally, Labour must think hard about military action. The late Jo Cox wrote in an article in October 2015 about 'three strands' of action, namely 'humanitarian, diplomatic and military'.²² She insightfully observed that 'pursuing just one of these strands will not work – military action alone is not a solution, nor is a strategy that only seeks to talk, nor is just responding with more aid. Without all three components we cannot protect innocent civilians.' Cox consistently advocated for the adoption of a no-bombing zone as a course of action that would save civilian life, reduce the flow of refugees, and induce a political settlement to the conflict, all the while avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia.²³ Of course, whether or not to commit to military action is the heaviest decision that a politician can take. But it should at least remain an option that the Labour Party is willing to evaluate given the circumstances on the ground in Syria.

Anti-interventionism and orientalism

Why have Western leftists got it so wrong on Syria? The anti-interventionist argument on Syria tends to be backed up by two case studies of recent interventions in the Middle East: Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. But if Iraq is a lesson in the perils of 'liberal interventionism', then Syria is a lesson in the perils of non-intervention. The invasion of Iraq caused large-scale loss of human life, undermined international law and inflicted wounds that will take decades to heal. These very same results have been achieved – and worse – in Syria, not through action, but through inaction. Libya, meanwhile, is in a much better state than Syria. The civil war in the country has killed fewer than 20,000 people, while the death toll in Syria stands at over twenty times this number.²⁴ The murder apparatus of a tyrant is not being deployed against its own people because Gadhafi has been overthrown, and while Libya is wracked by a crisis of governance, there is at least a foreseeable future of stability. An ISIS affiliate emerged briefly in the north of the country, and now appears to have been defeated. To suggest that Assad murdering his own people represents a more stable form of governance than the current situation in Libya is absurd, and fetishizes the myth of the stability of dictatorships over human life.²⁵

Recent history simply cannot withstand the comparisons that the anti-interventionist argument seeks to make. At work here is a deeper intellectual problem. Most

significant, it seems, is the way in which anti-imperialism has become the central, perhaps the only, explanatory tool when it comes to large parts of the left's understanding of foreign policy. The main focus of Corbyn's friends in the Stop the War Coalition, for example, is on anti-imperialism rather than pacifism, but this is imperialism narrowly understood. There is no room for criticism of Russia in their inchoate and incoherent thoughts on Syria's war. This is despite the fact that, presumably, on their definition of imperialism, Assad's Syria must be seen as a client of Russia. The fact that Russia is fighting this war to maintain a friendly regime and its access to the Mediterranean should make it clear that the word 'imperialism' does not always need to be prefixed with the word 'American'.

This emphasis on Western imperialism also means that the politics of the Arab world are reduced to terms of pro- and anti-American forces. The West is held to be almost omnipotent. The idea that the Syrian revolution is inspired by or under the control of the West is fairly common on the far left, but relies on the idea that Syrians would be willing to submit to barbaric attacks without defending themselves if it were not for the advice of the CIA. The constant refrain that Syria is destined to violence because of sectarian division is ignorant in the extreme; people who do not know any better simply avoid having to engage seriously with the history, culture and politics of the Arab world by dismissing it as explicable only by 1,400 year-old hatreds between Sunni and Shia. This, as Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami point out in their important book on the Syrian conflict, is Orientalism. The new Orientalism is largely to be found on the left, but it is no better than older, more overtly imperialist and racist forms. The Arab world is not just a playing field for imperial intrigues; it has its own politics and its own aspirations for justice and dignity.

We must also understand that not intervening does not leave the West unexposed to the politics of the Middle East. The failures of the international community stoke bitterness and anger in Syria, and a feeling of having been abandoned by the world leads desperate people into the arms of extremists. Anti-interventionism has created both resentment against the West and the circumstances in which extremism can flourish. The best way to encourage people to believe in conspiracy theories, after all, is to behave as if you're part of a conspiracy. The West must remember that if it watches the bombing and gassing of hundreds of thousands of people while muttering about 'complexity', and then immediately forms an international coalition of powers the moment murder comes to the streets of Western cities, it looks to people in the Middle East like racism, selfishness and imperialist conspiracy.

Yet for many ordinary Syrians, the demands of their revolution, despite almost six years of agony, have not altered. The series of fragile, and often illusory, ceasefires over the past few years has provided them with opportunities to demonstrate this, and thousands have repeatedly taken to the streets across the country to make their

demands for the end of the dictatorial regime, which for years had been drowned out by war. These protests also made clear that their revolution is against tyranny in all its forms, as many were directed against ISIS and JFS; like Assad, these groups have turned their fire against protestors and, as in the case of those who protested against Assad, the protestors have refused to surrender. Syrians are tired of being told constantly by Western commentators that this revolutionary movement, which has struggled against Assad, against al-Qaeda, and against ISIS, does not exist.

After Aleppo

UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura has described the catastrophic situation in Syria as the 'worst humanitarian disaster since World War Two', and it will shame us when the history of our times is written.²⁶ Similarly to international inaction in Rwanda and in Srebrenica, the Syrian case stands out as an example of the international community failing to uphold its promise of 'never again' after the Holocaust. The recent fall of Aleppo has changed everything, and nothing. A bastion of mostly moderate opposition, the capture of the city by pro-Assad militias after four years of fighting, and the subsequent forced displacement of its population, marked a definitive turning point in the war. The need for civilian protection has never been clearer. Despite yet another declaration of a ceasefire, this time without the involvement of any Western countries, the regime and its supporters continue to attack civilians on a daily basis. While the Western left consumes itself in debates over whether or not intervention is ever justified, Syrian civil society continues to beg for something to be done.

Getting beyond our limited thinking on intervention is of the utmost importance, and thinking about new ways of intervening is a pre-requisite to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis. We hope that this essay will prompt greater thought, reflection and debate about a progressive foreign policy, and help us to move away from facile divisions between, as Jo Cox put it, the do-somethings and the do-nothings. At the same time as advocating thought and discussion, however, we must remember that this conflict has been going on for almost six years, and that with every passing day the diagnosis gets bleaker. Assad's slaughter continues with the help of his allies, extremism grows, and the world becomes less safe. We need to think seriously about Syria. But we also need to act.

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