

# Events in Syria – Which side are you on?

*By Sara Flounders*

When U.S. imperialism engages in an attack on any government or movement, it is essential that the workers' and progressive political movements for change gather as much information as is available and take a stand.

It is cowardly to be neutral and rank betrayal to stand on the same side as the imperialist octopus, which seeks to dominate the world.

This has been an ABC for workers' movements through 150 years of class-conscious struggles. It is the very basis of Marxism. It is reflected in union songs that raise the challenge "Which side are you on?" and by labor organizers who explain again and again: "An injury to one is an injury to all."

A social explosion is shaking the Arab world. U.S. imperialism and all the old regimes tied to it in the region are trying desperately to manage and contain this still unfolding mass upheaval into channels that do not threaten imperialist domination of the region.

The U.S. and its collaborators are also trying to divide and undermine the two wings of the resistance -- the Islamic forces and the secular nationalist forces -- which together overthrew the U.S.-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. There is now a concerted U.S. effort to turn these same political forces against two regimes in the region that have opposed U.S. domination in the past -- Libya and Syria.

Both Libya and Syria have their own development problems, which are exacerbated by the general global capitalist crisis and decades of compromise imposed on them as they tried to survive in a hostile environment of unrelenting attacks -- political, sometimes military and including economic sanctions.

The U.S./NATO bombing of Libya has clarified where imperialism stands regarding that country. The transnational exploiters are determined to totally seize hold of the richest oil reserves in Africa and cut off the billions of dollars that Libya was contributing toward the development of much poorer African countries.

Syria is also targeted by imperialism -- because of its heroic defense of Palestinian resistance over decades and its refusal to recognize the Zionist occupation. Syria's assistance to Hezbollah in their struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanon and their strategic alliance with Iran cannot be forgotten.

Even if a great deal of Syria's internal situation is difficult to understand, it is important to note that in this unfolding struggle clear statements of support for the Syrian government and against U.S. destabilization efforts have come from Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Hezbollah Secretary General Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon and several exiled leaders of Hamas, the Palestinian organization that was elected by the people of Gaza. These political leaders have experienced first-hand U.S. destabilization campaigns that used corporate media fabrications, externally financed opposition groups, targeted assassinations, special ops sabotage and well-trained Internet operatives.

On the side of the supposedly "democratic opposition" are such reactionaries as Sen. Joseph Lieberman, chair of the powerful Senate Homeland Security Committee, who called on the U.S. to bomb Syria next, after Libya. Outspoken supporters of the opposition in Syria include James Woolsey, former CIA Director and advisor to Senator John McCain's presidential campaign.

## **Wikileaks exposes U.S. role**

An article entitled “U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups” by Craig Whitlock (Washington Post, April 18) described in great detail the information contained in U.S. diplomatic cables that Wikileaks had sent to news agencies around the world and posted on its web site. The article summarizes what these State Department cables reveal about the secret funding of Syrian political opposition groups, including the beaming of anti-government programming into the country via satellite television.

The article describes the U.S.-funded efforts as part of a “long-standing campaign to overthrow the country’s autocratic leader, Bashar al-Assad,” which began under President George W. Bush and continued under President Barack Obama, even though Obama claimed to be rebuilding relations with Syria and posted an ambassador to Damascus for the first time in six years.

According to an April 2009 cable signed by the top-ranking U.S. diplomat in Damascus at the time, Syrian authorities “would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change.” The Washington Post article describes in some detail the links between the U.S.-funded opposition Barada TV and the role of Malik al-Abdeh, who is on its board and distributes videos and protest updates. Al-Abdeh is also on the board of the Movement for Justice and Democracy, which his brother, Anas Al-Abdeh, chairs. The secret cables “report persistent fears among U.S. diplomats that Syrian state security agents had uncovered the money trail from Washington.”

## **Role of Al Jazeera**

Perhaps the most revealing challenge to and exposé of the destabilization campaign in Syria came with the resignation of Ghassan Ben Jeddo, the best-known journalist with Al Jazeera’s television news programs and chief of its Beirut bureau. Ben Jeddo resigned in protest of Al Jazeera’s biased coverage, especially noting a “smear campaign against the Syrian government” that has turned Al Jazeera into a “propaganda outlet.”

Al Jazeera favorably covered the unstoppable mass upsurge of millions in Egypt and Tunisia. However, this satellite news channel has also extensively reported every claim and political charge, regardless of how unsubstantiated, made by the political opposition in both Syria and Libya. It became the strongest voice in the region, watched by millions of viewers, to call for U.S. “humanitarian” intervention, no-fly zones and bombing of Libya. So it is important to understand the position of Al Jazeera as a news corporation, especially when it claims to speak for the oppressed.

Al Jazeera, which is based in Qatar, never reports that 94 percent of the work force in Qatar is made up of immigrants who have absolutely no rights at all and exist in conditions of near slavery. The brutal repression of the mass movement in the absolute monarchy of Bahrain, which is just next door to Qatar and is now occupied by Saudi troops, also receives little coverage on Al Jazeera.

Is this censorship because Al Jazeera TV News is funded by the absolute monarch of Qatar, the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani?

It is especially important to note that Al Jazeera never mentions the huge U.S. Central Command military air base right there in Qatar. Drones on secret missions throughout the region regularly take off from this base. Qatar has also sent planes to participate in the U.S./NATO bombing of Libya.

Qatar works closely with the U.S. State Department in supporting U.S. intervention in the area. Qatar was one of the first Arab states, and the first among the Gulf States, to establish relations with Israel. During the 2009 Israeli bombardment of Gaza, it canceled these relations but has since offered to renew them.

## **Facebook and counter-revolution**

The CIA and National Endowment for Democracy have become expert at utilizing a barrage of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube to overwhelm targeted governments with millions of fabricated messages, wild rumors and images.

Fabricated alerts about struggles and splits among rival factions in Syria's military leading to resignations turned out to be false. For example, Major Gen. al-Rifai (Ret.) denied as baseless news broadcasts over satellite television that he was leading a split in the military. He added that he had retired 10 years ago.

Izzat al-Rashek of the Hamas Politburo and Ali Baraka, Hamas representative in Lebanon, denied published claims that the leadership of this Palestinian resistance organization was relocating to Qatar from Damascus. Ali Baraka explained that this was a U.S. fabrication to pressure Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah and obstruct Palestinian reconciliation while raising conflict between resistance movements and Syria.

The Syrian government has charged that snipers fired into demonstrations, shooting army and police in an effort to have police open fire on demonstrators.

Rumors, anonymous Internet postings and satellite television reports aimed at heightening sectarian differences are part of the destabilization campaign.

## **Dual character of Syria**

It is not difficult to see why U.S. imperialism and its pawns in the region, including Israel and the corrupt dependent monarchies of Jordan, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, would want to see "regime change" in Syria.

Syria is one of the few Arab states that have no relations with Israel. Several Palestinian resistance organizations have offices-in-exile in Syria, including Hamas. Syria is allied closely with Iran and with Lebanon.

Syria today is not socialist nor a revolutionary country. Capitalism with its resulting inequality has not been overturned. There is a capitalist class in Syria; many within it have benefited from "reforms" that sold formerly state-owned industries to private capital.

However, the Syrian state represents contradictory forces. It has been a bulwark to protect the gains won in the anti-colonial struggles and upheavals by the Arab masses in 1960s and 1970s. During that period many important social gains were made, major industries and resources that had belonged to foreign capital were nationalized, and big advances were made in guaranteed health care, living standards and education.

Syria under the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is fiercely secular. It has maintained religious freedom for all while allowing no one religious grouping to dominate or be promoted by the state.

But the regime in Syria has also harshly repressed efforts of mass movements based in Lebanon and Syria that wanted to take the struggle further. It has defended its repression of past movements by pointing to its precarious position right next to Israel, the impact of two Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973, and the resulting Israeli occupation and annexation of the important Golan Heights region of Syria for 44 years.

Years of U.S. sanctions and past destabilization efforts have also had a cumulative effect. The state apparatus, ever fearful of continuing outside intervention, has become fearful of change.

It is essential to recognize this dual character and not apologize for or ignore all the problems that flow from it.

Syria has had the added burden of providing for more than 500,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants for the past 63 years. Their conditions are better than in any surrounding countries

because, unlike in Lebanon and Jordan, healthcare, education and housing are accessible to Palestinians in Syria.

### **Impact of Iraq war**

The massive U.S. invasion and destruction of neighboring Iraq, the Bush-Blair discussion of a similar attack on Syria in 2003, and the harsh new sanctions on Syria have added intense pressure.

But the most dislocating factor is never discussed in the corporate media: More than 1,500,000 Iraqis have flooded into Syria to escape the last eight years of U.S. occupation.

This was a huge influx for a country with a population in 2006 of 18 million. According to a 2007 report by the office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Refugees, the arrival of 2,000 desperate Iraqis per day had an extreme impact on all facets of life in Syria, particularly on the services offered by the state to all its citizens and all refugees. Syria has the highest level of civic and social rights for refugees in the region. Other surrounding countries require a minimum bank balance and ban destitute refugees.

The unexpected arrival of these Iraqi refugees has had a dramatic impact on the infrastructure, on guaranteed free elementary and high schools, on free healthcare, on housing availability and other areas of the economy. It has led to a rise in costs across the board. The prices of foodstuffs and basic goods have gone up by 30 percent, property prices by 40 percent and housing rentals by 150 percent.

Iraqi refugees also benefited from Syrian state subsidies in gasoline, food, water and other essential goods provided to everyone. Such a large mass of unemployed people led to the lowering of wages and increased competition for jobs. The impact of the global economic downturn during this difficult period added to the problems. (Middle East Institute, Dec. 10, 2010, report on Refugee Cooperation)

The U.S. created the refugee crisis, which left more than 25 percent of the Iraqi population displaced by sectarian violence. Yet it accepts the lowest number of refugees and has donated less than the cost of one day of the war in Iraq toward U.N. relief costs. U.S. sanctions on Syria have increased the economic dislocations.

All this has increased the awareness of the Syrian government and people about the dangers of U.S. occupation and the internal destabilization and bloodbath that can come with U.S.-instigated sectarian violence.

Washington claims it is worried about instability in Syria. But U.S. imperialism as a system is driven to create instability. The overwhelming dominance and power of military and oil corporations in the U.S. economy and the enormous profits of military contracts endlessly reinforce the drive to seek military solutions.

Every statement made by the Syrian government has recognized the importance of making internal reforms while maintaining national unity in an extremely diverse country that has historic differences in religion, tribes and regions and now contains almost 2 million refugees.

The diverse nationalities, religions and cultural groupings in Syria have every right to be part of this process. But what they need most is an end to constant, unrelenting U.S. intervention.

U.S. hands off!

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