

Trump's missiles won't liberate the Syrian people

Anyone who cares about justice and peace needs to mobilize against the U.S. government's new escalation in the Middle East

THE TRUMP administration's April 7 missile strike targeting the Shayrat Syrian Arab Air Force base in Syria is a frightening escalation of a six-year-old conflict that has already had catastrophic consequences for the Syrian people.

Trump said the decision to launch 59 Tomahawk Cruise missiles was in retaliation for the April 4 Sarin gas attack in Idlib province, carried out by the Bashar al-Assad regime, that killed scores of civilians and left hundreds sickened. "I will tell you that attack on children had a big impact on me," Trump said. "My attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed very much."

But this claimed concern about civilian casualties is nothing but rank hypocrisy coming from Trump.

After all, one of his first acts as president specifically targeted Syrian refugees for an indefinite travel ban, barring them from entering the U.S. as they sought refuge from the Assad regime's murderous brutality. Did he not know that there were "children" among the refugees?

Moreover, the Trump administration is responsible for a sharp increase in civilian deaths and injuries in Syria and Iraq as a result of a recent escalation in U.S. bombing in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

One bombing carried out under Commander-in-Chief Trump hit a school sheltering dozens of families on the outskirts of Raqqa on March 21, where ISIS has its stronghold. Many of those families had fled other areas of the country seeking safety, only to find death under U.S. bombs.

Trump's hypocrisy is particularly galling against the backdrop of the overall carnage in Syria. In six years, roughly half of Syria's population, some 11 million people, have



been forced to flee their homes to escape the violence—6 million are internally displaced, and 5 million are refugees. The death count in Syria since the war began is almost half a million people. Of those killed, 24,000 have been children.

But since the U.S. began bombing Syria in 2014 as an extension of the war on ISIS first launched in northern Iraq, the April 7 missile strike was the first to specifically target the military assets of the Assad regime, which is responsible for more than 90 percent of the dead and wounded.

Does Trump care only about Syrian children if they are killed by chemical weapons,

rather than conventional ones? His justifications for the recent U.S. missile strikes are patently false.

THE U.S. missile strike on April 7 was not about saving Syrian lives. It was about many things, but not that.

For one, like many presidents before him, Trump saw an opportunity to use military intervention to restore flagging approval ratings.

Just a week ago, administration officials were peddling a completely different line: that accommodation with Assad was inevitable. "[I]t's about changing up priorities and our pri-

ority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out,” said U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley. Press Secretary Sean Spicer said: “With respect to Assad, there is a political reality that we have to accept.”

So what happened? It’s been speculated that Assad took these statements as a green light to use the regime’s full arsenal against opponents, including chemical weapons. In 2013, after the regime’s barbaric gas attack on East Ghouta, Assad promised to give up chemical weapons in exchange for the Obama administration calling off a threatened military strike.

Whatever the regime’s motives, the Trump administration performed an about-face—and the volume of applause from the mainstream media, Democratic leaders and foreign policy experts alike showed that it paid off.

The celebration of war today among people claiming to be Trump’s critics yesterday is stomach-turning. On MSNBC, supposedly the home of the president’s liberal opponents, anchor Brian Williams referred to images of the Cruise missiles arcing across the night sky as “beautiful” three times in 30 seconds.

Hillary Clinton herself called for bombing Syrian airfields before Trump ordered the strike, and Bernie Sanders endorsed the goal of holding Assad responsible for his use of chemical weapons, though he called on Trump to come to Congress for a vote to approve future military action in Syria.

Trump was praised for his “judicious” use of force—which killed nine civilians, including four children.

And there’s the Russia question: Because Russia is Assad’s chief backer, the missile strike also allowed Trump to silence Democratic critics who have raked him over the coals for being too cozy with Vladimir Putin. True, the U.S. tipped off Russian forces about the coming missile strike, but the Russian government has been sharply critical.

But there are more global motives for carrying out this attack. The missile strike, targeted on a single airfield, did little to damage the Assad regime’s military capacity. But this is consistent with the U.S. foreign policy goal, carried over from the Obama administration, of allowing the Assad regime to remain strong enough to head off revolutionary change.

Nevertheless, Trump succeeded in sending a message that he could back up his nationalist rhetoric and saber rattling with military force—and have the support of a united political establishment, Republican and Democrat alike, behind him. That message wasn’t meant for Assad and even Russia so much as other rivals—especially North Korea and China.

So Trump had much to gain from this missile strike. But what comes next and how bad could it become?

Trump may think that a limited strike can back his adversaries down, but low-risk, one-



time deployments of air power have generally had little lasting military impact.

What happens the next time the Assad regime carries out a slaughter, maybe not with banned chemical weapons, but with barrel bombs—the government’s weapon of choice? Will the Trump administration look the other way, carry out another limited “demonstration” bombardment—or commit more forces to the intervention?

This is why the logic of escalation is built into even “demonstration” attacks.

The reality is that the U.S. war machine is primarily responsible for the crisis in the Middle East—from George H.W. Bush’s 1991 war on Iraq, through Bill Clinton’s murderous regime of sanctions and air strikes, to George W. Bush’s invasion and occupation, and a civil war that spread sectarian bloodshed.

The growing violence inflicted by the U.S. government has given rise to more violence—setting the stage for the rise of ISIS and tolerating the counterrevolutionary savagery of the Assad dictatorship, among other Middle Eastern regimes.

IT IS important for everyone who cares about social justice to build opposition to the U.S. war machine in this brutal new phase.

Trump’s agenda has already provoked an unprecedented level of resistance, and this means there is fertile ground for building an antiwar opposition. But there are also challenges that must be met squarely, and not put off.

First of all, it is essential to reject Trump’s justification of a “humanitarian intervention.” Few readers of this publication would give Trump the benefit of the doubt on this, but stated humanitarian motives have long served as a cover for the U.S. government’s pursuit of

its strategic interests.

Second, we need to champion the call for Syrian refugees to be given safe passage, homes and support wherever they choose to go, including the U.S. It is a sickening indictment of the U.S. government, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, that it has only allowed a fraction of the refugees from Syria to come to the U.S.

Third, the Democratic Party has done little to nothing to build a real resistance since Trump became president, and will be even more harmful in this latest phase. Democratic leaders not only support Trump’s missile strike, but the call for congressional approval of further attacks is a plea to be involved as a junior partner in turning up the war machine.

Fourth, a principled antiwar and anti-imperialist response to the U.S. attack on Syria must include opposition to the Assad regime that has terrorized the population of Syria, and to all the other regional and imperial powers, whether they have intervened on the side of the Syrian government, like Russia and Iran, or against it, like Saudi Arabia.

Some of the actions and protests against Trump’s military strike have been organized by those on the left who defend the Assad regime as anti-imperialist and who have supported the Russian and Iranian military intervention against the Syrian people. But you can’t be pro-dictator and antiwar. These forces are opposing the imperialism of their own country, but defending a different empire.

These organizations don’t have a monopoly on the antiwar struggle, even if they call some of the demonstrations. Socialists need to make clear their opposition to Trump’s escalation of the U.S. war machine, but we will send our message loud and clear that we reject Assad’s tyranny and support the struggle against the regime.

With all these challenges before us, it will be important to demonstrate, but also to educate. The future of any antiwar struggle depends on opponents of imperialism learning the ugly history of U.S. intervention, and analyzing the other imperial and regional forces participating in the violence and repression against the Syrian people.

Donald Trump thinks he has scored a victory by launching a missile strike on Syria. He needs to be proven wrong.

We need to expose the hypocrisy of a “war on terror” that inflicts state-sponsored terrorism on people throughout the Middle East, including Syria. And we must build support for Syrian refugees who have fled violence and repression—in defiance of governments like the U.S. that would reject their desire to find safety and freedom.