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A no-fly zone in Syria isn't a humanitarian response — it's a call to war.



Hillary Clinton in Afghanistan in 2009. US Embassy Kabul Afghanistan

The idea of enforcing a no-fly zone in Syria is gaining steam. Hillary Clinton said during the second presidential debate that she supports the idea and last week the British parliament debated the concept. On Friday, Barack Obama and his foreign policy advisers met to discuss their options in Syria.

The rationale offered for a no-fly zone is that it will end Russian and Syrian bombing in eastern Aleppo and perhaps break the harsh siege those forces have enacted there. But while NFZ proponents present it in humanitarian terms, it would actually represent an escalation of war that is guaranteed to harm civilians in the name of protecting them.

NFZs involve destroying the air force and anti-aircraft weaponry of the country subject to them. Clinton herself has acknowledged that implementing the NFZ she advocates would entail the deaths of “a lot” of civilians. None of this is to minimize or rationalize the torture, mass killings, or severe sieges enacted by the Syrian state and its allies. The imminent question, however, is not, “Is the Syrian government good?”; it’s “Should America drop more bombs on Syria?”

Given that the United States is currently killing civilians in several countries, with or without humanitarian pretenses, it’s absurd to entrust it with stopping the killing of Syrian civilians. America is prosecuting a war in Somalia and corpses are piling up in its latest round of bombing in Libya.

At the end of September, the United States killed fifteen civilians in a drone strike in Afghanistan, where it escalated its decade-and-a-half long war this past summer. Death and colonization continue apace in Palestine with decisive US support. Since 2015, the United States has played an essential role in a Saudi-led attack on Yemen that has killed more than 6,800 people, displaced 2.8 million, involved attacks on Doctors Without Borders hospitals, and caused a serious food shortage that could be pushing the country into a famine. There’s also evidence that suggests the United States was directly involved in the Saudi bombing of a Sanaa funeral that killed 140 and injured 600 and last week the United States itself took up bombing Yemen.

The United States, moreover, is already killing Syrians. The American-led coalition’s bombing campaign against ISIS has killed at least 1,660 civilians in Iraq and Syria. On July 18-19 an American bombing “pulverized entire families, including young children,” killing between 56 and 212 people in the Al-Tukhar village, near Manbij, which is a city in the Aleppo governorate. Before the month was out another US bombing killed reportedly killed at least twenty-eight civilians in Manbij.

In broad terms, US foreign policy aims are oriented around protecting long-term capitalist stability and serving the short-term interest of capitalists. This involves enriching the American ruling class by means such as selling armaments or reconstructing countries wrecked by the

US's wars and it involves efforts to maintain US supremacy in the Middle East and beyond. Military bases are an important tool of US primacy and since the start of the war in Syria Washington has set up outposts in the country: one in Al-Hasakah and one near Kobanê as well as the At-Tanf garrison and another one close to the Jordanian border for CIA-backed insurgents fighting the Syrian government.

These indicate that US planners are prepared to use force or its credible threat in Syria or to use the Syrian setups for wars in other countries, for the foreseeable future. This is a way for the United States to claim for itself the right to shape Syria's future and that of the region more generally at gunpoint. Because US foreign policy is guided by a quest for global hegemony rather than humanitarianism, there are no grounds for expecting it to pursue policies that lead to a humanitarian outcome in Syria.

The United States has repeatedly derailed possibilities for a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian war and during an April cease-fire the United States continued to arm antigovernment groups in Syria. Instead of helping de-escalate the conflict, Washington has carried out a proxy war against the governments of Russia and Syria, as well as Iran and Hezbollah, as even a ruling-class intellectual like Jeffrey Sachs recognizes.

Though it's a crude error to suggest that all opposition to the Syrian state is the result of a state department plot or to ignore the grievances Syrians have against their repressive government, it is nevertheless also true that the United States has supported regime change in Syria through a billion-dollar-a-year CIA program.

The US's support for the Syrian opposition has sometimes helped organizations hostile to the minorities that make up roughly 35 percent of the Syrian population. The United States supports what remains of the Free Syrian Army, though many of these fighters have vowed vengeance against Syria's Shiites and other minorities, and armed a CIA-vetted group called Raman Corps that in East Ghouta has allied with the outfit formerly called the al-Nusra Front, a Sunni supremacist group loyal to al-Qaeda implicated in massacring nineteen or more Alawite civilians in Zara.

In 2015, similarly, Nusra — or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham as it now wants to be called — massacred twenty Druze villagers. The same year a US-Turkish-Saudi "coordination room" ordered the rebel groups it was backing to cooperate with Jaish al-Fatah, a coalition led by al-Nusra. The CIA-funded Zenki movement, famous for beheading a twelve-year-old Palestinian they said

belonged to a militia fighting on behalf of the Syrian government, kidnapped Syrian Orthodox bishops and handed them over to al-Nusra, a group with whom Zenki has a long history of working.

Groups operating in Syria that are hostile to minorities have also been enabled by Turkey, an important node in the US empire. Last week WikiLeaks released documents from Clinton and her staff that demonstrate the US foreign policy elite knew Saudi Arabia and Qatar were supporting ISIS as recently in 2014. None of this has stopped the United States from selling these states weapons, investing in them, or engaging in military coordination with them and it's not as if the United States is the subordinate power in its relations with Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, sanctions levied by the United States and its allies have made Syria aid-dependent while also undermining aid provision. The sanctions have blocked access to blood safety equipment, medicines, medical devices, food, fuel, water pumps, spare parts for power plants, and more. A United Nations email blames the US and EU sanctions for contributing to a doubling in fuel prices in just eighteen months and a 40 percent drop in wheat production since 2010, which caused the price of wheat flour to soar by 300 percent and rice by 650 percent. These are among the reasons for Syria's food shortage.

The email goes on to describe these sanctions as a "principal factor" behind the deterioration of Syria's health-care system as medicine-producing factories that haven't been ruined by the fighting have been forced to close because of sanctions-related restrictions on raw materials and foreign currency.

Meanwhile, the United States continues to subsidize the Israeli occupation of Syria's Golan Heights.

Supporting sectarian groups, building bases, imposing sanctions, and providing arms that help fuel the conflict while obstructing negotiations are the policies of an actor who is perfectly willing to take part in inflicting horror on Syria. It is not the actions of a force capable of calling others to account for their crimes.

People living in the United States or its partner states have, first and foremost, a responsibility

to protest the actions of their own government. Instead of an NFZ, we should demand that Western governments work to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, durable ceasefires, and unconditional negotiations aimed at ending the war. They will only do so if they are pushed by the anti-imperialist, antiwar movement that cannot come to fruition soon enough.