

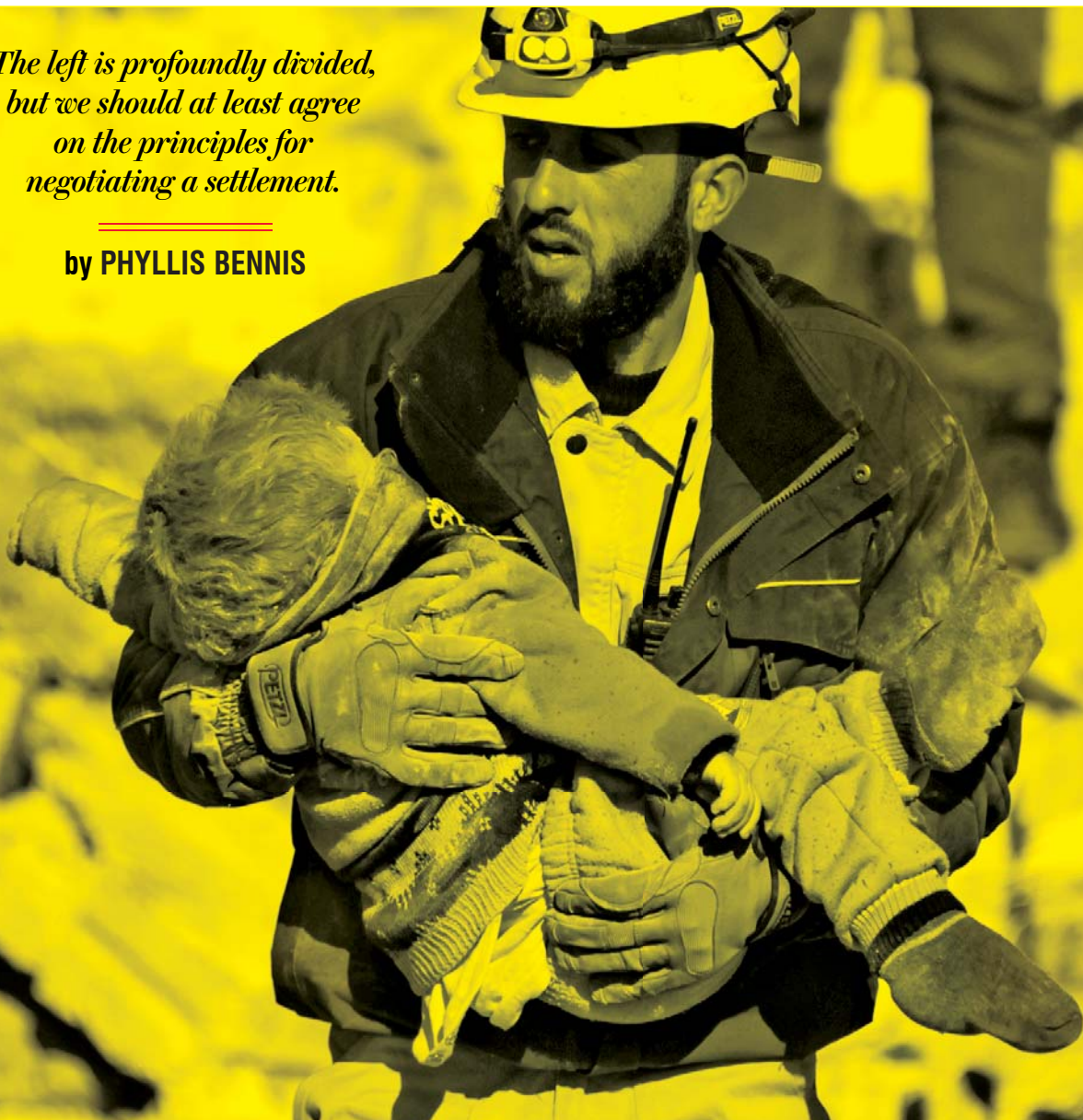
The Nation.

# THE WAR IN SYRIA CANNOT BE WON. BUT IT CAN BE ENDED.

*The left is profoundly divided,  
but we should at least agree  
on the principles for  
negotiating a settlement.*

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by PHYLLIS BENNIS



**W**E NEED A POWERFUL MOVEMENT demanding an end to the war in Syria, but the US and, to some extent, the global antiwar movements remain largely paralyzed. There are some campaigns responding to specific congressional and other attempts to continue and even deepen the war, with some particularly good work against US support for Saudi Arabia. However, we seem unable to

sort through the complexity of the multilayered battles raging across Syria, and unable to overcome our internal divisions to create the kind of powerful movement we need in order to challenge the escalating conflict.

It was easier during earlier wars. Transforming public consciousness, changing US policy—those were all hard. But understanding the wars, and building movements based on that understanding, was easier. Our job was to oppose US military interventions and to support anticolonial, anti-imperialist challenges to those wars.

During the Vietnam War, and later during the wars in Central America, this meant we all understood that the US side was wrong, that the proxy armies and militias supported by Washington were wrong, and that we wanted US troops, warplanes, and Special Forces out. In all those wars, within the core of our movement, many of us not only wanted US troops out; we supported the social program of the other side. We wanted the Vietnamese, led by the North Vietnamese government and the Vietcong in the South, to win. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, we wanted US troops and advisers out and also victory for, respectively, the Sandinistas and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. In South Africa, we wanted an end to US support for apartheid, and we also wanted the African National Congress to win.

The solidarity part got much harder in Afghanistan and especially in the Iraq wars. We stood in solidarity with ordinary Afghans and Iraqis suffering through US sanctions and invasions, and some of our organizations built powerful ties with their counterparts, such as US Labor Against the War and its links with the Iraqi oil workers' union. And we recognized the right under international law for an invaded and occupied people to resist. But as for the various militias actually fighting against the United States, there were none we affirmatively supported, no political-military force whose social program we wanted to see victorious. So it was more complicated. Some things remained clear, however: The US wars were still illegal and wrong; we still recognized the role of racism and imperialism in those wars; we still demanded that US troops get out.

Now, in Syria, even that is uncertain. Left and progressive forces, antiwar and solidarity activists, Syrian and non-Syrian, are profoundly divided. Among those who consider themselves progressive today, there's a small but significant segment of activists who want their side to "win" the war in Syria. Only a few (thankfully, from my vantage point) support victory for what they refer to as "Syrian sovereignty," often adding a reference to international law and only sometimes acknowledging that this means supporting the current Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. (It should be noted

that international recognition doesn't necessarily equal legitimacy; the South African apartheid regime was internationally recognized for decades.) A larger cohort wants to "win" the war for the Syrian revolution, the description they give to the post-Arab Spring efforts by Syrian activists to continue protesting the regime's repression and working for a more democratic future. There is a deep divide.

Among those who want the Syrian regime to remain in power and the opposition to be defeated, some base their position on the belief that Syria leads an "axis of resistance" in the Middle East—a claim long debunked by the actual history of the Assad family's rule. From its 1976 enabling of a murderous, Israeli-backed attack on the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar in Beirut, Lebanon; to sending warplanes to join the US coalition bombing Iraq in 1991; to guaranteeing Israel a largely quiet border and quiescent population in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; to its role in interrogating and torturing detainees at Washington's behest in the global War on Terror, Syria has never been a consistent anti-imperialist or resistance center.

Others in our movement want the opposition, or at least some part of it, to win against the regime. They support the independent, often progressive, and indeed heroic activists who first challenged Damascus in non-violent protests in 2011 and who continue to try to survive and build civil society amid war and terror. Their position, however, often ignores the enormous gap between those truly brave and amazing activists, on the one hand, and on the other the array of not very progressive, indeed mostly reactionary and rarely heroic militias doing the actual fighting—against Assad's forces, sometimes against ISIS, and often against civilians across the bloody Syrian battlefield. Those opposition fighters—including those deemed "moderate" by the United States and its allies as well as those acknowledged to be extremists—are armed by Washington and its regional allies, and few appear interested in supporting any of the progressive goals the Syrian revolutionaries are working for. In our movement, this group is further divided between those backing a US-imposed no-fly zone or other military action to support the opposition, in the name of

**The left is divided not just on the means, but on the end itself.**

**Children march** against the Assad dictatorship in the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs, December 2011.





Rebel fighters and civilians mark the fifth anniversary of the Syrian uprising, Aleppo, March 2016.

some version of “humanitarian intervention,” and those who oppose further US military action.

We’ve certainly faced internal division before. During the 1998–99 Kosovo War, many on the left supported the military involvement by the United States and NATO in one of the earliest versions of Western “humanitarian intervention.” Regarding Iraq, from 1991 through 12 years of crippling sanctions—genocidal in their impact, according to two directors of the UN Oil-for-food Program who resigned in protest, as well as other observers—and both Iraq wars, differences rose sharply. They divided those who saw Saddam Hussein as the enemy of the United States and therefore inherently worthy of support, and those capable of understanding that we could fight to end illegal US sanctions and wars and still refuse to support a ruthless dictator (who happened to have been a longtime Washington client himself), even if he now opposed the United States. But even in those difficult times, there was unity (however unacknowledged) in our opposition: There were two competing national marches, but they were both against the war. In the case of Syria today, even that is uncertain.

As it stands now, parts of our movement don’t just disagree on how to achieve the same goal; they want different results. Some progressives support the opposition, whose military forces are armed and backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and some European nations; others defend the Syrian government, armed and backed by Russia and Iran. The situation is further complicated by those who appear to be hoping for a victory by the progressive non-military forces of the Arab Spring’s Syrian revolution, while others look to Rojava, the Syrian Kurdish enclave of progressive, feminist fighters affiliated with the Turkey-based guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, as their target of solidarity. Most of the intervening governments—including those of the United States, Russia, Europe, and Iran (though Saudi Arabia and Turkey remain uncertain at best)—want ISIS to lose.

The paralysis these divides have created in our movement is exacerbated by the fact that what we call “the war in Syria” is not one civil war. It’s a complicated chessboard of players, with multiple conflicts being waged by outside forces fighting one another amid the civil war still raging between the Syrian regime and its domestic opponents. Those outside forces are fighting for various regional, sectarian, and global interests that have little or nothing to do with Syria—except that it is Syrians doing the dying. Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting for regional hegemony and for Sunni-versus-Shiite domi-

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nance. The United States and Russia are fighting for global and regional positioning, military bases, and control of resources. Secular and Islamist forces are fighting for dominance of the anti-Assad front. Turkey was fighting Russia until recently; then the two seemed to settle their differences before Turkey invaded northern Syria, where it is now primarily going after the Kurds. The United States and Israel are fighting Iran—unlike in Iraq, where the United States and the Iranian-backed militias are on the same side in a broad anti-ISIS front. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are vying for dominance among the Sunni monarchies. And while Turkey is fighting the Kurds, progressive Syrian Kurds are challenging the more traditional Peshmerga of the Iraqi Kurdish regional government.

And then there’s ISIS fighting the Syrian regime and some of the regime’s opponents, while seeking to impose its brutal control over Syrian and Iraqi land and populations, while the United States, Russia, and a number of European countries, along with the Syrian and Iraqi governments, wage a lethal and increasingly global war against ISIS. And all of them are fighting to the last Syrian.

## Ending the War

**G**IVEN ALL OF THIS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO recognize that the largest contingent of antiwar activists and progressives by far isn’t fighting to *win* the war for any side, but is committed to *ending* the war. And that can and does include many who also stand in solidarity with the incredibly brave activists who continue to struggle, the men and women who work beneath the barrel bombs and mortar attacks and other air strikes, trying to maintain life in their besieged cities and towns.

But that part gets complicated too. Some of the civil-society groups working in opposition-held areas are supporting, one way or another, various armed factions backed by the United States and its allies that are fighting against the regime. Some—including some of the best-known humanitarian organizations—are supported financially and politically by the United States, Europe, and/or their regional allies, who promote them as part of their propaganda war against the Assad regime. Some of them are mobilizing support for greater US military intervention. The exposés on the backing of several of these organizations, now being published by some of the best progressive journalists around, have illustrated important realities, helping us to understand how the mainstream media’s coverage endorses and builds on the US government’s strategic goals. But many of those exposés also leave out crucial factors—including the often wide gap between the goals of US imperialist policy-makers and their ability to achieve them.

Some sectors of the US establishment have long recognized that the Syrian regime, despite (and sometimes because of) its legacy of repression, has often played a useful role for US and Israeli interests. Conversely, some powerful elements—neoconservatives and many in Congress most enthusiastically, but also, at least offi-

cially, the Obama administration—want regime change in Syria. But that reality doesn't mean that ordinary Syrians, many of whom were challenging the repressive regime in Damascus long before the infamous list of seven US regime-change targets in the Middle East was ever created, didn't have their own entirely different and entirely legitimate reasons for opposing Assad. They are not all Syrian versions of Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi criminal anointed by Washington neocons to lead their "liberation" of Iraq in 2003.

Neoncon dreams of regime change in Syria do not make those neoncon forces all-powerful. And they do not negate the legitimacy of the earlier indigenous opposition movements that erupted in Syria in the context of the Arab Spring, just as they did in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere, or that of the continuing political opposition. The question of agency is far too often ignored or sidelined by even the most thorough investigations of nefarious US intentions. The fact that a humanitarian organization may be funded by US institutions because it is deemed useful for Washington's goals, or even created in the hope that it would help achieve those goals, does not mean that every activist within that organization is a tool of US imperialism.

For instance, the White Helmets (aka the Syrian Civil Defense) are clearly getting money from the US Agency for International Development. They have now (likely with encouragement or pressure from their US friends and sponsors, and despite the Obama administration's strong opposition) officially called for a no-fly zone in Syria. Reporting and acknowledging that fact is important, but obviously their support for such a US military escalation does not make that demand legitimate for US or global antiwar forces, any more than it did when some political activists in Libya called for the same kind of escalation there. Declaring a no-fly zone, as former secretary of defense Robert Gates has acknowledged, is an act of war. But it's also crucial to recognize and appreciate that the White Helmets are doing vital, often heroic humanitarian work as first responders in opposition-held areas subject to murderous military assault. In the absence of state institutions or even sufficient international humanitarian support, such local initiatives, however compromised in the political/propaganda arena, play a crucial human role. Understanding those separate roles—the humanitarian and the propaganda—and recognizing that they can exist simultaneously in a single organization is important as we struggle to build a movement to end the war.

Over the long term, we need to build a powerful movement to end the global War on Terror and the militarization of US foreign policy that this war reflects. Right now, the centerpiece of that war is Syria. So we cannot put aside building such a movement because the divisions among our forces make it difficult. Those who recognize the need to focus on building a movement to end the war should be able to unite around some combination of these demands on the US government:

§ You can't defeat terrorism with war, so stop killing people and bombing cities in the name of stopping others from killing people. This means stopping the air

strikes and bombings and withdrawing the troops and Special Forces: Make "no boots on the ground" real.

§ Recognize that ending the multifaceted war in Syria will only be possible when outside powers stop fighting proxy wars down to the last Syrian. Work toward a full arms embargo on all sides, challenging the US and global arms industry. Stop the US train-and-equip programs, and stop allowing US allies to send weapons into Syria, making it clear that if they continue, they will lose all access to US arms sales. Campaigns and diplomatic efforts to convince Russia and Iran to stop arming the Syrian regime will become more realistic when the United States and its allies stop arming the other side.

§ Create new diplomatic, not military, partnerships involving outside powers and those inside Syria, including regional governments and other actors. Real diplomacy for ending war must take center stage, not fake diplomacy designed to enable joint bombing campaigns. All must be present at the table, including Syrian civil society, women, and the nonviolent opposition, as well as armed actors. Support UN efforts toward local ceasefires and new diplomacy.

§ Increase US support for refugees and other regional humanitarian needs. Make good on all pledges and UN funding commitments, and vastly increase money and aid to UN agencies as well as the number of refugees welcomed for resettlement in the United States.

Except perhaps for the last, few of these demands are likely to be achieved in the short term. But it is up to us to build a movement that puts forward what an end to this murderous war could look like, as part of a movement to end the so-called War on Terror overall and support the refugees created in its wake. The military alternatives now being debated will not end the war in Syria, and they do not protect vulnerable populations. There is no military solution. It's time we rebuilt a movement based on that reality. ■

*Phyllis Bennis is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies. Her most recent book is Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror: A Primer.*

**Neoncon dreams of regime change do not negate the legitimacy of courageous Syrians resisting a dictatorship.**

Rescuers search for survivors after an air strike on the rebel-held Kadi Askar neighborhood in Aleppo, July 2016.



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