

Syria Has Shown That Stop the War UK is Not Fit for Purpose

March 28, 2017 By [Barbara McKenzie](#)

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This is a sequel to [Stop the War, Libya and the CPGB-ML](#), which considered the response of the UK's Stop the War Coalition to NATO's plans for regime change in Libya.

The war on Syria began in much the same way as that for Libya: romantic talk of the Arab Spring, and claims of peaceful protests ruthlessly put down by a dictator with hitherto unsuspected genocidal tendencies. However the non-NATO aligned members of the Security Council, on the one hand, and a high proportion of the general public on the other, had learned from the disastrous consequences of Russia and China's acquiescence to a no fly zone in Libya, and thus moves to introduce one for Syria, either with or without the agreement of the Security Council, have so far failed.

The purpose of the Libyan war, i.e. the overthrowing of Gaddafi, was achieved within a few months thanks to NATO's bombing campaign; the lack of such action on the part of NATO and its allies has enabled the Syrian to withstand the terrorist onslaught, with the Russian participation a game-changer. The protracted nature of the conflict has enabled and encouraged research into the facts of the war, with extensive evidence available on essential points, in particular:

1: Forced regime change in Syria had been planned for years by US and allies (see [Wesley Clark](#) on US intentions in 2001, the [Clinton emails](#) from 2006 and the [revelation](#) by French Minister Dumas relating to NATO plans for Syria in 2009).

2: Syrians had little taste for a revolution in Syria: no-one in Damascus turned out for a pan-Arab [Day of Rage](#) on 4 February 2011, while in those early days there were huge demonstrations in favour of the government and Bashar al Assad in Damascus and Aleppo.

3: The early protests, notably in the provincial town of Dara'a, were violent from the outset, with a [stiffening of foreign terrorists](#) imported from Libya. There is extensive eyewitness testimony to that violence, including that of Jesuit priest [Father Frans der Lugt](#) (murdered in April 2014), of [soldiers](#) called to the famous protest in Dara'a on 15 March 2011, and of [civil defence workers](#).

4: The heavy involvement of outside governments in the war, with NATO powers such as the US, the UK and France, and Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar spending enormous sums on training, arming and funding militants and financing foreign mercenaries; the role of Turkey in the movement of prospective jihadis and trade with militant groups like ISIS cannot be overstated.

5: The barbaric nature of the extremists, native and foreign, who owned the insurrection.

In '[The cause and instigation of the war on Syria](#)', which references many essential primary sources, Angelis Dania concludes:

‘The fact that the US was plotting regime-change in Syria with the use of false propaganda should colour every report on events in Syria, subjecting them to the need for review in light of the now established pre-existing US regime-change campaign.’

Many who found the idea of overthrowing the extremely oppressive regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or at best undemocratic and unpopular government of Egypt were disillusioned when they realised that regime change was only meant to happen in countries not aligned with the West. The Stop the War leadership, however, whose remit somehow expanded from opposing war to active concern with the internal affairs of other countries, has continued to support in principle the concept of the Arab Spring.

Stop the War’s Position on Syria

Over the years Lindsay German has written a number of articles reiterating the organisation’s position, almost always with a note of apology for not supporting the war on Syria, e.g. [There is no hypocrisy in our stance on Syria](#) November 2012. Stop the War’s official position on Syria, in simple terms, is that it is opposed to external intervention. The leadership have constantly opposed all proposals by the UK government for a no-fly zone or a bombing campaign in Syria, and occasionally objected to external intervention in more general terms.

Accordingly STW protests have been organised in response to any specific proposal that would entail bombing Syria, such as when it was claimed that the Syrian government had crossed Obama’s red line by using chemical weapons in East Ghouta in August 2013. (The sarin attack was a false flag by insurgents, probably Liwa al Islam, an earlier incarnation of Jaish al Islam, see for example the [WhoGhouta](#) investigation.)

After Russia joined the war, condemnation of Russia was emphasised, e.g. [StWC Statement on Syria](#) ‘We oppose all of these interventions, including the current Russian bombing of Aleppo’, and [With or without UN agreement, bombing Syria by Russia or UK should be opposed.](#)

‘Stop the War is against Russia’s attacks on Syria. We think they should stop immediately. And we would welcome less hypocrisy from those who have supported US and allied bombing over the last year.’

Stop the War’s record in terms of protest and publications shows that its primary focus is to oppose blatant warmongering such as invasion and bombing campaigns. However STW has on occasion acknowledged, condemned, and even protested against less overt interventions.

In November 2016, STW published Abigail Watson’s article on the role of the SAS in Syria, [The UK’s Not So Secret War in Syria](#), and a few weeks later when action in Aleppo was being mooted by the British government, German [acknowledged](#),

‘It is foolish in the extreme to believe that really the west and its Middle East allies are not doing anything to help the opposition. That simply flies in the face of the facts including money, arms, special forces.’

While Stop the War publicly opposes intervention in Syria, the organisation claims that it does not support ‘Assad’, and is extremely defensive in the face of accusations, real or imagined, that STW might be made up of ‘Assad apologists’. Lindsay German’s [Does Opposing Western Intervention in Syria Make the Anti-war Movement “Assad Apologists”?](#) ensures distance from the Syrian government by referring to it as the ‘regime’, ‘Assad’s regime’, and ‘Bashar al Assad’s regime’ – terms favoured by the Syrian government’s opponents.

Stop the War supports a political solution in Syria. The Syrian government have a policy of offering amnesty to insurgents who want to come in from the cold, and Russia has been administering a [Centre for Reconciliation](#) to facilitate this. This is not what Stop the War has in mind; rather it looks to negotiations in Geneva which attribute the status of legitimate opposition to groups allied with ISIS and al Nusra, such as Jaish al Islam and Ahrar al Sham.

Many STW officers openly support the ‘revolution’ in Syria, and gloss over the responsibility of the UK and other external governments for the insurgency. In December 2015 Stop the War published a [statement](#) drafted by John Rees, setting out the organisation’s official position on Syria. Once again, the statement starts out on the defensive.

For avoidance of doubt: the positions of Stop the War Coalition

The Stop the War Coalition is under unprecedented attack because of its opposition to the bombing of Syria and because attacks on it are perceived to weaken Jeremy Corbyn. Here in straight forward terms are our views on some issues now being routinely misrepresented by the Tory government, the right of the Labour Party and sections of the media.

- 1. The STWC has never supported the Assad regime. Just as we never supported the Taliban, Saddam Hussein or Colonel Gaddafi. Only in the minds of ‘them or us’ pretend patriots does the opposition to our own government’s wars mean support for dictators or terrorists. Our case has always been that war will worsen the problem and not solve it. We were right in that analysis in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.*
- 2. The STWC has never supported Russian intervention in Syria and issued a statement opposing the bombing as soon as it began.*
- 3. The STWC does believe that it is the people of Syria who are the only ones who should decide the fate of their country free of all great power and regional power interference.*
- 4. The STWC is utterly opposed to the IS as a totally reactionary and, in the Arab Spring, counter revolutionary force.*
- 5. The STWC believes that the invasion and dismemberment of Iraq, and western support for Saudi Arabia, were and are instrumental in the creation of the IS.*
- 6. The STWC does not support calls for western invention, including an air war to establish a no fly zone, whether those calls emanate from Syrian exiles or anyone else, just as we did not support such calls from anti-Taliban or anti Saddam Afghans or Iraqis. Syrians do not all speak with one voice but many are opposed to western bombing.*
- 7. The STWC concentrates on campaigning against UK government policy because this is where we are citizens and voters. [...]*

STW priorities are only marginally different from Barak Obama’s [emphasis added]:

1: The first point, reiterated in the sixth, is to voice **opposition to Bashar al Assad**, comparing him, furthermore, to Saddam Hussein and the Taliban.

2: The second is to **criticise Russia** for its involvement in the war.

3: Rees twice mentions **ISIS**, the fall guy when it comes to jihadi barbarism, but **does not mention al Nusra, Jaish al Islam, or any other of the vicious gangs operating in Syria.**

4: In December 2015, by which time the character of the ‘moderate opposition’ was well known, he is still talking about the ‘**Arab Spring**’ and ‘**revolution**’.

5: **The necessary condition for the Syrian war, i.e. the role of the UK and its allies, is only mentioned in the last two points, and then in relatively mild terms.**

Lindsay German produced another position statement in October 2016, [Stop all intervention in Syria and let the people decide their future](#), which was consistent with everything said over the previous years: the Coalition did not support ‘Assad’ (i.e. the legitimate government of Syria) or Russia, and was opposed to a no-fly zone and the sale of arms – other interventions by the Western powers are ignored here. German claims: *‘We do not take a position on the internal politics of Syria, and believe that this is a question for the Syrian people alone’*. Much of the article was self-promotion and self-congratulation.

‘We did not stop the war in Iraq, but we have helped to shift opinion in this country against further wars. It could be argued that Chilcot would never have happened without an anti-war movement.’

Problems with Stop the War’s approach to Syria

‘Don’t bomb Syria’ is a totally inadequate response to the war on Syria.

In August 2013, pursuant to the false flag chemical attack by extremists on Ghouta, the British government voted on the question of officially going to war with Syria. The Stop the War Coalition mobilised demonstrations against the proposal, which was lost. Lindsey German penned a self-complacent article, [A partial victory, but a victory](#), 30 August 2013:

British MPs’ arguments and information were influenced by a strong public opinion against such a war, itself a product of a mass movement which didn’t stop a war ten years ago but has prevented a further one now. [...] Britain will play no part in any Syrian intervention.

German’s article totally disregards the role of Britain in the Syrian war. The NATO countries and their allies have consciously endeavoured to carry out their plan to achieve regime change in Syria, contrary to the will of the Syrian people, by pouring billions into funding and arming terrorists. Turkey has funneled thousands, or more probably [hundreds of thousands](#), of jihadists through to Syria and in return bought from ISIS stolen [Syrian oil](#), [antiquities](#) and [Aleppo’s factories](#).

The United Kingdom, moreover, has a large budget for propaganda projects specifically designed to create support for a no fly zone, such as the fake humanitarian outfit the [White Helmets](#), staffed by members of vicious gangs like [al Zinki](#), seven year old [Bana](#) who tweeted in perfect English from Aleppo, calling for WWII in order to ‘save Aeppo’, and fake research organisations like the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), essentially one man in a house in Coventry, but cooperating with the British Foreign Office.

Stop the War’s protests against active intervention are clearly inadequate when it is turning a blind eye to the material and moral support given to the terrorist groups in Syria, and to the propaganda designed to achieve compliance with a no-fly zone.

‘Russian bombing’

Stop the War's position is that [with or without UN agreement, bombing Syria by Russia or UK should be opposed](#). *'Stop the War is against Russia's attacks on Syria. We think they should stop immediately'*.

If there were no external intervention, no funding and arming of terrorists, including hundreds of thousands of foreign mercenaries, there would be no Syrian war. Russia, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah are all militarily involved in the Syrian war, on the invitation of the Syrian government, as a response to external intervention. They are defending Syria against barbaric extremists who are loathed by the Syrian people. The involvement of Russia, Hezbollah and other Syrian allies is consistent with international law and has been absolutely vital for the country's survival. **To put the Russian contribution to defending Syria on a par with the illegal intervention and support for terrorism by NATO and its allies is the height of dishonesty.**

Obama's much vaunted campaign against Daesh in Syria only saw ISIS and associated groups grow and flourish. The presence of a US air force did nothing to prevent ISIS convoys cross the desert from Iraq and take Raqqa and Palmyra. On the other hand, the [attack by NATO forces](#) on Syrian troops protecting the besieged town of Deir ez Zor caused the loss of more than 60 Syrian lives and facilitated ISIS advancement. (Many people, including the Syrian government, believe NATO consciously provided ISIS with air cover according to a pre-arranged plan, though this is denied by NATO.)

Russian air-cover enabled the Syrian Arab Army and its allies to retake Palmyra in March 2016, though not before the museum curator was murdered as an 'Assad stooge' and extensive damage was done to the historic site. Russian assistance helped liberate Aleppo from ISIS and al Qaeda affiliated gangs, who were terrorising eastern Aleppo and shelling western Aleppo, causing horrific casualties. Since then Russia has provided extensive humanitarian aid to Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria, ranging from [food aid](#) and [mobile hospitals](#) to [demining eastern Aleppo](#). Stop the War, however, wants to see an end to Russian involvement in Syria.

Stop the War accepts the NATO narrative on Syria without question

Stop the War's leadership specialises in producing flabby articles devoid of content: there is no new information, no analysis, just NATO's discredited mantras of popular revolution, moderate rebels and wicked despot Bashar al Assad. Much of the space is taken up in apologising for not supporting invasion or a no-fly zone, or claiming that STW is not pro-Assad. Given that Stop the War never addresses an alternative and more valid concern, i.e. whether the Syrian government is right to resist an externally sponsored insurgency, its protestations of not being pro-Assad have to be seen as a dishonest ploy.

While Lindsay German satisfies herself with referring disparagingly to the 'Assad regime' and becoming indignant if anyone suggests that STW should (heaven forbid) support Syria against an immoral and illegal war driven by, amongst others, the United Kingdom, other officers of Stop the War are openly hostile to the Syrian government, for example chairman Murad Qureshi:



Murad Qureshi
@MuradQureshiLDN

Follow

You'll find that you don't have the National Socialists in Syria but you'll find the Baath Party which Alawites like Assad belong too.

1:36 AM - 1 Sep 2013



and John Rees:



John Rees
@JohnWRees

Follow

@MsIntervention @STWuk Assad is a butcher responsible for tens of thousands of deaths. And Blair for over million Iraqi's ...do the maths

2:42 AM - 11 Jul 2012



Stop the War's position is essentially the bogus 'third way': while it opposes direct bombing, and occasionally complains about the better publicised aspects of direct intervention, it assumes the validity of the regime change narrative. **Despite the wealth of contrary evidence, at no point does STWC question the NATO narrative of a legitimate uprising and an illegitimate government.**

There has been an enormous amount of research carried out on the subject of the Syrian war, by people alert to the inconsistencies in the NATO narrative, who have wanted to find out the truth. Some of these people have traveled to Syria more than once, and recently. 21st Century Wire alone has published over 100 articles on the Syrian war. The articles contain a wealth of references, photographic and video evidence, and testimony from Syrians.

STW has not published, promoted or referenced, either in its homepage or via social media, a single article that gives an assessment of the facts that differs from that of the corporate media.

Mother Agnes Mariam

Stop the War has continued to suppress alternative views on Syria as it did with Libya. Most notable was the shocking incident when STW, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, allowed the likes of **Owen Jones** and **Jeremy Scahill** to bully Mother Agnes Mariam out of speaking at the 2013 Anti-War Conference in London.

Mother Agnes Mariam el-Salib, mother superior of St. James Monastery in Qara, Syria, is a nun who has worked in Syria for over 20 years. She has spoken out about the Syrian 'revolution',

warning of the danger that religious minorities in Syria face from Western-backed extremists. She also queried the charge that the Syrian government was responsible for the sarin attack on Ghouta, having carried out her own research into the matter. Mother Agnes was [interviewed by RT](#) in September 2013.

Mother Agnes was invited by Stop the War to speak at the International Anti-War Conference held on 30 November 2013. A campaign was orchestrated by hardline proponent of the war on Syria Mohammed Idrees Ahmad and others to ‘deplatform’ Mother Agnes, with pressure applied on other invited speakers primarily via social media.

Owen Jones and Jeremy Scahill eventually declared that they would not share a platform with Mother Agnes, and at that point Mother Agnes voluntarily withdrew.

Owen Jones explained his actions on his own blog, [Mother Agnes, Syria and free speech](#), relying on an [article](#) by an obscure pro-jihadist group, Syrian Christians for Peace. His principle objection to Mother Agnes, aside from the fact of her being an ‘Assad supporter’ (read ‘opponent of the war on Syria’), is that she queried attribution of the Ghouta chemical attack to the Syrian government. According to Jones:

‘Mother Agnes is perhaps most infamous for publishing a 50-page report claiming that the video footage of the Ghouta massacre was faked, that the children suffocating to death had been kidnapped by rebels and were actually sleeping or “under anaesthesia”’.

Owen Jones does not give a link to Mother Agnes’s report, and for good reason, as it gives the lie to his accusation.

‘The chemical attacks which took place in East Ghouta on August 21, 2013 could be the most horrific false flag operation in history.

‘To date, available evidence indicates that numerous children were killed by “opposition rebels”, their bodies manipulated and filmed with a view to blaming the Syrian government for the attacks, thus sparking outrage and galvanizing worldwide public opinion in favor of another bloody, imperial US-led war.’ [Mother Agnes Mariam](#)

The UN report on the Ghouta attack does not ascribe blame, and well before the conference doubts had been expressed on the likelihood of the culprits being the Syrian government, on both technical and political grounds. On 13 September Sharmine Narwani and Radwan Mortada analysed the weaknesses of the UN report [Questions Plague UN Syria Report on Syria](#), while *WhoGhouta* published a [Summary of Conclusions](#) on 24 September, which pointed the finger at insurgents. Any fair person would have applauded, rather than condemned, Mother Agnes for querying the claims of the corporate press that ‘Assad’ was responsible for the attack.

Owen Jones also relies on the [Open Letter to Stop the War Coalition](#) penned by Idrees Ahmad. The striking feature of this letter is that most or all of the signees, for example, including Peter Tatchell, Mary Rizzo, Louis Proyect and Ahmad himself, support active intervention in Syria against the government including a no-fly zone. Jones chooses to identify with active proponents of the war on Syria rather than those who oppose it.

Owen Jones was not asked to ‘make common cause with Mother Agnes’, except insofar as they were both presumed to oppose imperialist wars. As the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), has [pointed out](#):

Jones has shared platforms with Labour politicians who were key architects of the invasions and genocides in Iraq and Afghanistan – some of the worst crimes of the modern era.

Stop the War itself kept its response to Mother Agnes's withdrawal to a minimum, though taking care to reassure Jones and Scahill:



A [brief statement](#) was published that managed to be both bald and dishonest.

'We have always provided a platform for a diversity of opinions within a broad anti-war perspective. We hope that we can now build the conference as a strong focus for opposition to war and imperialism.'

This is patently false: once Mother Agnes was removed from the equation, there was no-one present to put forward the perspective of the legitimate Syrian government, and the conference was dominated by people who essentially support the war on Syria.

The implications of the deplatforming of Mother have been addressed by a number of commentators, including [Neil Clark](#) and the indefatigable [Communist Party of Great Britain \(Marxist-Leninist\)](#).

'Mother Agnes has single-handedly demonstrated that Stop the War is not about stopping the war; it is about keeping the anti-war movement within limits that are acceptable to the imperialist warmongers. It is about the warmongers keeping the masses of anti-war activists under tight control.' [CPGB-ML](#)

Is the Stop the War leadership genuinely opposed to a no-fly zone in Syria?

Although the official policy of STW is to oppose external intervention in Syria, the behaviour of its officers contradicts this. Counterfire, which was founded by Stop the War officers and is closely linked to STW, has [promoted Syria Burning](#) by Robin Yassin Kassab and Leila al Shami, both of whom seek a no-fly zone in Syria.

In January 2012, John Rees interviewed two guests on his show In Islam: Iman Mujahed, an Irish woman married to a Syrian and the British Moussab Azzawi. Thus neither of the guests were Syrian, both supported the 'revolution', and both wanted external intervention. Moussab Azzawi asked for a humanitarian corridor, buffer zone, and a no-fly zone, Mujahed's priority was a buffer zone, but she has no objections to a no-fly zone. The purpose of the interview, in fact, was to promote a no-fly zone in Syria on the Libyan model.

The British Foreign Office has invested heavily in propaganda projects relating to Syria that are specifically designed to gain acceptance for a no-fly zone from the public, in particular the White Helmets. Stop the War makes no attempt to expose these scams: their position on the White Helmets, for example, is simply that they have no position.

That the Foreign Office is funding a supposed humanitarian organisation which blatantly supports Foreign Office policy should be a red flag. However, even if one naively assumes that the organisation's primary purpose is humanitarian, **any anti-war movement should condemn the White Helmets' calls for a no-fly zone. Stop the War has not done this.**

In September 2015 Stop the War was involved in the organisation of a march in support of refugees; Jeremy Corbyn was in attendance as the newly elected leader of the Labour Party. Primary responsibility for the march was claimed by [Syrian Solidarity UK \(SSUK\)](#). [SSUK](#) supports the 'revolution' in Syria and seeks a no-fly zone in Syria. FSA (Free Syrian Army) flags, anti-Assad slogans and demands for a no-fly zone featured prominently. [Jeremy Corbyn](#) appeared on the same platform as SSUK's Clara Connolly, who [used an event in support of refugees](#) to plug the White Helmets and to demand a no-fly zone (which would inevitably mean more refugees), and he stood right alongside Abdulaziz Almashy, co-founder of SSUK, who was wearing an FSA scarf.

So while Owen Jones refused to appear on a platform with Mother Agnes Mariam, who never spoke anything but the truth about Syria, Jeremy Corbyn shared a platform with open supporters of a no-fly zone in Syria and of the FSA, which was already known to be associated with al Nusra, ISIS, [the use of chemical weapons](#), [cannibalism](#) and all manner of other [atrocities](#) (see also Eva Bartlett's [The Non-Useful Atrocities](#), or even the [Daily Mail](#)).

Jeremy Corbyn may not have fully understood the implications of his presence on this platform, however SSUK and Stop the War officers like John Rees certainly would have. Genuine opponents of the war, who should have objected strongly, are the very people who hope Corbyn will rescue the country from the Tories, the Blairites and austerity – thus they remain silent, not just about this incident, but about Stop the War's shortcomings in general and the implications of Corbyn's ties to the organisation.

Stop the War is not fit for purpose

A feature of the debate over the wars on Libya and Syria has been the participation of those who have claimed to oppose external military intervention in those countries but at the same time facilitate that intervention by expressing sympathy for the 'revolutionaries' and vilifying the respective governments. Common characteristics include:

- Support for the long-discredited Western construct of a 'popular revolution' in Syria
- Demonisation of Bashar al Assad (and before him Muammar Gaddafi)
- Condemnation of Russian support for Syria
- Positioning themselves as being the only anti-war alternative
- Repeated apology for not supporting a no-fly zone
- Total blanking of research which questions the NATO narrative
- Neither confirming nor questioning the validity of scams such as the White Helmets.

Stop the War shares all these characteristics with other organisations and individuals who function as gatekeepers in the context of the Syrian war. Its leadership has ensured that the movement has been reduced to the role of controlled opposition, deflecting the rank and file by focusing on overt intervention and ignoring the realities of Western imperialism in Syria.

'What we need to understand is that, whether accidentally or on purpose, StW's leaders always manage to come down on the side of imperialism, helping to demonise the victims of imperialist aggression and to neutralise the opposition to imperialist war at home.' [CPGB-ML](#)

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