

The civil war in Syria and the fate of the Middle Eastern revolution

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The expiration of the Arab League ultimatum to the Syrian regime of Bashir al-Assad, to withdraw its forces from combat inside Syria and hold talks with pro-Western opposition groups, brings foreign military intervention in Syria's escalating civil war one step closer.

Behind the armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar stand the United States, Britain and France. They have engaged for months in backdoor manoeuvres with Ankara, Riyadh, and the Syrian opposition, trying to ensure that the overthrow of Assad's pro-Iranian Alawite regime brings to power a pro-Western puppet regime in Damascus.

From the beginning, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as Washington, have tried to use the social movement against Assad, inspired by this year's revolutionary struggles in Egypt and Tunisia, to promote a right-wing, pro-imperialist change of regime. The Syrian National Council, currently the leading proxy force for the regional and imperialist powers, is based in Turkey and has two main groups. The Damascus Declaration is dominated by pro-US forces; the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood is the proxy of the Arab states and Turkey.

As in the imperialist war in Libya, there is a division of labour in this imperialist operation. Forces like the exclusively Sunni Free Syria Army, also stationed in Turkey, provide a vehicle for military operations against both Alawis and Syrian security forces. In the meantime, various self-proclaimed "liberals" are promoted in the media to praise the movement as non-sectarian, while religious and ethnic antagonisms are whipped up on the ground.

Writing in the *Gulf News*, Patrick Seale commented: "The mutual kidnappings, torture, beheadings and

displacement of populations taking place between the Sunni and Alawite communities in the central city of Homs—often described as 'the capital of the revolution'—send a fearsome signal of what might be in store for the rest of the country."

The Syrian regime, no less than those of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, deserves to perish. It has been built on decades of repression and the impoverishment of its people, with fully 32 percent of the population living on \$2 a day or less. But the question of questions now posed point blank to the masses is: what will replace Assad?

A sectarian regime installed at the behest of Ankara, Riyadh, and Washington would represent not a step forward but a step backward for the working class, in Syria and internationally. After the installation of a Western puppet regime in Libya, it would represent a further victory in the imperialists' counter-revolutionary onslaught against the Middle Eastern revolution.

After the fall of their client regimes in Tunis and Cairo, Washington, London, and Paris concluded that "regime change" was posed throughout the oil-rich Middle East, and that they must act now to shape it in their interests. Where oppositional sentiment threatened imperialism's allies, in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, it must be opposed at all costs. Where it could be made to serve imperialism's interests, in Libya and now Syria, it must be brought under the control of right-wing, pro-imperialist forces.

The US and Europe view the "Shia crescent" stretching from Tehran, to Damascus, Hezbollah in Lebanon and now the government in Iraq, as a potential threat to its hegemony. The Sunni Arab states, Turkey and Israel fully share this desire to isolate and

undermine Iran.

George Friedman, founder and CEO of the private intelligence corporation Stratfor, notes that the best place to counter Iranian influence “is Syria. And the key move in Syria is to do everything possible to bring about al Assad’s overthrow... the likely solution is covert support for the Sunni opposition funneled through Lebanon and possibly Turkey and Jordan.”

Toppling Assad, he concludes, “is critical. It changes the game and the momentum.”

The most likely basis for military intervention against Assad is the advanced plan of Turkey to set up a “buffer zone” stretching across the border. Backed by France, the Free Syria Army has demanded the establishment of such a “no fly zone” as a bridgehead for its operations.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, government adviser Jonathan Spyer insisted that to “tip the balance” against Assad, “more direct involvement will likely be required.” A buffer zone “could provide a foothold for Syrian insurgents to organize and build their challenge to Assad’s rule. But it could also raise the possibility of Syrian-Turkish clashes.”

Full-blown civil war in Syria raises the spectre of a horrific regional war, involving Iran on one side and Turkey and various Sunni states on the other. This could be exploited by the major powers, up to and including direct intervention, as they did in Libya.

Such a danger cannot be averted based on supporting Assad or his backers in Tehran, or Russia and China. Rather, the Assad regime must be overthrown and replaced by a socialist, genuinely democratic government, uniting the working class in alliance with the oppressed rural masses irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliation in a struggle against imperialism.

This is not a purely national task. The fate of Syria is bound up with events unfolding throughout the Middle East, above all in Egypt. All the Western imperialists’ calculations have been predicated upon the exclusion of the working class from political life and the dominant role of its various regional agencies—both national governments and political forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

For this reason, the re-eruption of revolutionary struggle in Egypt is a threat not only to the US-backed military junta in Cairo, but all the carefully laid plans to

replicate the installation of pliant regimes modeled upon Libya’s National Transitional Council.

The emergence of a mass movement of workers and oppressed has already served to expose the duplicity of bourgeois and sectarian tendencies like the Brotherhood. It creates the necessary conditions for the overthrow of all the region’s corrupt bourgeois regimes, including the despotic Gulf monarchies.

This requires building a new leadership advancing a strategy of world socialist revolution, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the Middle East.

Workers’ governments must be established, tasked with carrying through the socialist transformation of the region’s economy—placing its vast resources at the disposal of the people. In this struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East and North Africa, the key ally of the Arab, Persian, Kurdish and Jewish workers is the working class in the United States and Europe, who have already been inspired in their own struggles by the revolutionary events in the Middle East.

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