

The US and its Middle East proxies

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The United States, Turkey and the Gulf States are actively preparing a military intervention in Syria. Russia's security services claim to have concrete evidence of an imminent shift to a "Libyan scenario" of "direct military intervention," beginning with establishing a no-fly zone—the very device that was used to sanction NATO's bombardment of Libya.

But more than a no-fly zone links the overthrow of the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi with the fate now planned for Bashir al-Assad. Libya was the first major expression of a counteroffensive by Washington in response to the downfall of two of its key allies in the region, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, aimed at securing its hegemony over the region's oil riches.

It involved the preparation of the direct military overthrow of Gaddafi by NATO, using a proxy force, the Transitional National Council, dominated by Islamist forces and funded and armed by US regional allies. This is now emerging as a pattern throughout the Middle East.

In Egypt itself, there has been the coalescing of an alliance between Washington, the Muslim Brotherhood and even Salafist groups that would in the past have been denounced as terrorists.

The *New York Times* wrote January 3 of "a historic shift" towards support for the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party that is set to dominate Egypt's new parliament. The newspaper wrote that members of the Obama administration view this as "a first step toward a pattern that could take shape with the Islamist parties' coming to power around the region in the aftermath of the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Islamists have taken important roles in Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt in less than a year."

US contacts with the Brotherhood go back to the early 1990s, but they have become much firmer after the Brothers proved their readiness to work under US

dictate—beginning in Libya. For the period of the "war on terror" proclaimed after 9/11, to continue overt relations with Islamist groups as had existed in Afghanistan in the 1980s was politically impossible. Now it is considered to be politically imperative.

Libya's Transitional National Council contained a large contingent from the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Britain's chief of defence staff, Sir David Richards, has admitted that they were, in turn, backed by the Gulf States, with Qatar, the Emirates and Jordan providing the key "land element without which the right outcome would have been impossible."

The Brotherhood looks set to play a significant role in the new government in Libya, thanks to the money provided by Qatar and the Brotherhood's co-thinkers in the region. It is also the dominant force within the Syrian National Council (SNC) and is likely equally influential within the even more shadowy Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Intervention in Syria is being prepared through the sponsorship of the SNC and FSA by Turkey. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan this week warned that Syria was "heading towards a religious, sectarian, racial war." He declared that Turkey would "take on a leadership role" to prevent such a conflict. In reality, Turkey is stirring up sectarian tensions by sponsoring a Sunni insurgency against the Alawite-dominated Assad regime, which is allied with Shiite Iran.

The Gulf States are intimately involved, with reports of Saudi Arabia and Qatar training brigades of the FSA.

Politically, the decision to suspend Syria from the Arab League was based on a resolution of the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council. It took place at a meeting during which the Algerian foreign minister was warned by Qatar, "Stop defending Syria because your turn will come."

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are liaising daily with the US

in efforts to declare the Arab League's Syrian observer mission a failure and seek a UN Security Council resolution, based on the "Responsibility to Protect" provisions that paved the way for the bombing of Tripoli. Qatar hosts a US airbase that is a hub for military operations in the Gulf. It has agreed to provide the Taliban with an office as part of Washington's attempt to negotiate a settlement in Afghanistan.

Behind its democratic rhetoric, the US is wholly indifferent to the depredations caused by dictatorships, which in many instances it has sponsored for decades. The guiding principle is to support those movements which facilitate efforts to exclude Russia and China from regional influence by isolating and destabilizing their allies, Iran and Syria. When it comes to popular movements against its allies, such as Bahrain, home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, Saudi troops are allowed in to crush the opposition.

This counteroffensive can proceed only by derailing the mass movement that erupted against former US clients Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt and channeling them behind leaderships that act under Washington's authority. A vital political cover is provided by bourgeois figures such as Egypt's Mohamed el Baradei, CIA assets and ex-regime people in groups such as the Damascus Declaration, and the supposedly "independent" unions controlled by the AFL-CIO-dominated International Labour Organisation.

These forces are held up as the officially-designated "democratic opposition," while they work with the Islamists against those regimes targeted for downfall such as Syria and to preserve other regimes such as the Egyptian junta.

A vital role is played by the ex-left groups, which portray every social and political movement in the Middle East as the latest expression of the "Arab Spring." Having lined up behind the US-led war against Libya on this basis, they are now preparing to do the same in Syria.

After reporting uncritically on the role of the Syrian National Council and Free Syrian Army, Britain's Socialist Workers Party only this month acknowledged the "appearance" of the SNC and FSA to be "a dangerous development." The SNC was set up in Turkey in August last year and the forces it represents have played a key role in determining the agenda of the

anti-Assad opposition movement from the start. Yet the SWP still insists that all claims of a "plot by the West and by pro-Western Arab regimes" are "absurd" and a "slander of the popular movement."

What the ex-left tendencies oppose above all else is the independent political mobilization of the working class against repressive regimes such as Assad's as well as Assad's pro-imperialist opponents.

The revolutionary social impulse that began in Tunisia and Egypt still animates the masses of the Middle East. But Libya proves that without its own programme and leadership, oppositional sentiment in the working class can be suppressed and sidelined, or even channeled behind reactionary, pro-imperialist movements whose aim is to secure their own positions as regional exploiters and trusted allies of Washington, London and Paris.

The overthrow of the region's corrupt regimes demands the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the Middle East to provide workers with a socialist and internationalist strategy. Workers and youth must oppose all attempts to sow divisions along religious and ethnic lines by fighting for the international unity of the working class in the struggle against imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation and the establishment of workers' governments across the Middle East and internationally.

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