

What is at stake in Syria?

Chris Marsden
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The international media is conspiring to conceal the real aims and intentions of the United States and other major powers towards Syria.

This week a renewed push in the United Nations to condemn the regime of Bashir al-Assad for “crimes against humanity” has been accompanied by a drumbeat of accounts of rising casualties in Homs, including the deaths of journalists. The media barrage excludes any objective analysis of the social and political character of the opposition, its ties to the imperialist powers, or the historical origins of the present crisis. All casualties in a civil war stoked by the US and its allies are automatically attributed to government security forces.

This is a coordinated campaign to manipulate public opinion in support of military intervention in the name of “human rights,” following the script of last year’s bloody exercise in regime-change in Libya. The immediate demand is for the setting up of “humanitarian corridors” protected militarily by the Gulf States, Turkey and NATO, as well as the arming of the opposition.

Working people and youth should reject all attempts to drag them behind another colonial-style intervention by cynically playing on their humanitarian impulses. The destabilization of Syria is not the result of a mass popular upsurge against Assad. Unlike the revolutionary movement that erupted in Egypt, the Syrian opposition has little support in major urban centres such as Damascus and Aleppo, where the installation of a Sunni regime that will persecute Syria’s minorities is feared.

Immediately protests began against Assad’s repressive regime, Washington worked with the regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey—to cultivate and arm a right-wing sectarian opposition with the aim of bringing about regime-change. The imperialist-backed opposition is led by Islamists

associated with the right-wing Muslim Brotherhood. In alliance with bourgeois figures with long connections to the CIA and various ex-regime forces, they dominate the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army.

Many of the journalists pontificating on Syria are well aware that humanitarian concerns do not animate Western support for the opposition. In the February 26 *New York Times*, Steven Erlanger acknowledges that the conflict in Syria “has already become a proxy fight for larger powers in the region and beyond.” He writes: “For Washington, Europe and the Sunnis of Saudi Arabia and the gulf, the impact on Iran is as important as the fate of Mr. Assad.”

Erlanger cites Olivier Roy, a French historian of the Middle East, who states bluntly: “Syria is almost the only country where the so-called Arab Spring could change the geo-strategic concept of the region... if the regime is toppled, we have a totally new landscape.”

Changing the landscape means isolating Iran, strategically located at the junction of the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia, and removing it as an obstacle to the establishment of US hegemony in the region.

Plans to overthrow Assad militarily to achieve this aim are being constantly leaked to the media. These leaks prepare public opinion for what comes next.

Asharq Al-Awsat, which is tied to the Saudi Royal family, has reported an unnamed source in the US military stating that the Pentagon is planning to intervene in Syria based on NATO’s 1998 strategy in Kosovo. It would begin by establishing “a secure zone” near the border with Turkey, followed by the provision of “humanitarian aid... first, through the International Red Cross and, then, through NATO forces that will move in from Turkey.”

This “paves the way for the declaration of an air exclusion zone” like those imposed on Kosovo and Iraq “before the overthrow of the regime of former Iraqi

President Saddam Hussein.”

The UN’s Human Rights Commission is set to endorse a call to “permit humanitarian agencies” to deliver aid to “Homs, Deraa, Zabadani and other areas.” France has said the UN Security Council will then be presented with another draft resolution on the need to gain access to these areas.

What has so far stayed the hands of the Western powers is not only the opposition of Moscow and Beijing, nor embarrassment over the known presence of Al Qaeda elements in the Syrian opposition—the US and its European allies are working with such forces in Libya. It is also the fact, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted to the BBC, that there is “very strong opposition to foreign intervention, from inside Syria, from outside Syria.”

Presently, no political force articulates the public hostility to war cited by Clinton—not the venal Arab regimes and least of all the various pseudo-left parties, large and small, that once claimed to be socialist and anti-imperialist.

Syria is only the latest in a series of colonialist adventures carried out by the US, with the active support of the European powers. The first Gulf War in 1991 coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the hands of capitalist elements that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy. The US saw this as an historic opportunity to rewind the clock of history all over the world.

A retreat from direct colonial rule was necessitated in the aftermath of World War II by the emergence of mass anti-imperialist movements that, despite the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, drew inspiration from the October Revolution of 1917.

The capitalist regimes established could never represent the genuine liberation of the working class and oppressed masses from imperialism. Washington was nevertheless wounded by this challenge to its rule and sought to reestablish its control through bloody interventions, covert and proxy wars, and support for right-wing movements and regimes. It saw the end of Moscow’s position as a contending super power as giving it a free hand to use its military superiority to establish hegemony over strategically vital oil-producing regions. What followed were interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

The current round of wars for neo-colonial

domination are overwhelmingly supported by the social democrats, Greens and liberals, with various pseudo-socialist groups trailing in their wake.

They have all sought to justify their stance by echoing the moral posturing of Washington, London, Paris and Berlin. Support for each new war for “human rights” and “democracy” requires a convenient bout of amnesia regarding the crimes committed in the last one. Clinton this week described Assad as a war criminal. But the world knows the US has committed war crimes, such as the destruction of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, that dwarf anything being perpetrated by Assad.

This does not trouble the liberal interventionists of all stripes, who are the main champions of the UN’s “responsibility to protect” doctrine, used to legitimize whatever act of imperialist banditry is in preparation. Their moral outrage is always selective, conditioned by a desire to preserve their own wealthy lifestyles by reinforcing their standing as trusted defenders of the financial oligarchy.

War against Syria would only be a stepping-stone to the targeting of Iran. It has already helped polarize the Middle East along a sectarian Sunni-Shia axis. It can rapidly become a regional confrontation involving direct conflict between the US, Russia and China, for whom Syria and Iran are strategic partners.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections call on workers and youth to make their reply to the warmongers: “Hands off Syria!” It is up to the Syrian people to determine their future, not a gang of predators with the scent of oil in their nostrils.

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