

Igniting the Syrian powder keg

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While billed as a last-chance intervention to halt the escalating bloodletting in Syria, the foreign ministers meeting convened by UN envoy Kofi Annan in Geneva for Saturday will merely set the stage for intensified demands by Washington and its allies for regime-change.

In advance of the meeting, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other Western officials have made wildly optimistic statements that Annan's efforts will bear fruit, publicly indicating that Russia, which has opposed foreign intervention in Syria, has shifted its position and is now supporting the ouster of the country's president, Bashar al-Assad.

Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, denied these claims at a press conference in Tunisia Thursday. "We are not supporting and will not support any external meddling," he said, adding that "this also applies to the fate of Bashar al-Assad."

Undoubtedly, Washington is playing a double game here. On the one hand, it is attempting to exert as much pressure as possible on Moscow to knuckle under to imperialist intervention in Syria. On the other, it is laying the groundwork for another propaganda campaign, this one aimed at casting Russia as the impediment to "peace," even as the US and its allies dramatically escalate their not-so-covert war.

Within Syria, this war has taken an ever more deadly form, marked by a wave of terrorist attacks in and around the capital of Damascus. Thursday saw strikes with powerful car bombs on the Palace of Justice in downtown Damascus as well on a local police station.

The day before, "rebels" attacked a television station located in a Damascus suburb. They ransacked the offices and studios before demolishing them with explosives and executed seven journalists and security guards, who were bound, forced to their knees and shot in cold blood.

UN officials have stated that the violence in Syria has

"reached or even surpassed" the levels that prevailed before the April 12 ceasefire agreement brokered by Annan. Moreover, they have noted, the killing is no longer so much a matter of pro- versus anti-government forces. Rather, "victims appear to have been targeted because of their religious affiliation."

In the name of "democracy," "human rights," and "humanitarianism," US imperialism and its allies have plunged Syria into a sectarian civil war. While feigning support for Annan's ceasefire plan, Washington has armed the so-called "rebels," who are increasingly dominated by Sunni Islamist elements, including those connected to Al Qaeda. The US claims to be providing these forces only with "non-lethal" aid—communications gear and intelligence used to coordinate attacks—but it has sent a contingent of CIA operatives to the Turkish-Syrian border to coordinate the distribution of weaponry paid for by Washington's regional client states, the monarchical dictatorships of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The criminal and reckless character of US policy is becoming more apparent with each passing day. The regional, ethnic and religious tensions that have been stoked up by the imperialist intervention in Syria are not only creating conditions for a bloodbath in that country, but threaten to drag the entire region into war.

On Thursday, it was reported in the Turkish press that columns of military vehicles carrying tanks, rocket-launchers and artillery have been sent to the Syrian border in response to Syria's shooting down last week of a Turkish fighter plane. The downed jet was apparently probing Syria's air defenses.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed that Turkey will "teach those who dare to test the limits of its might," and officials in Ankara have indicated that the rules of engagement have been changed on the border, with any Syrian forces approaching the frontier to be treated as a hostile force.

This could set the stage for open warfare, with other NATO powers pledged to support Turkey.

Meanwhile, there are mounting signs that the sectarian conflict let loose in Syria is spreading across the country's borders to Lebanon, which fought its own protracted civil war along similar lines, and to Iraq, where a string of bombings targeting Shi'ite pilgrims and shrines have killed over 150 people this month, threatening to reignite the sectarian bloodbath triggered by the US military occupation in 2006-07.

One of the clearest indications of Washington's real intentions is the Obama administration's blocking of Iran from attending the Geneva conference this Saturday. The State Department declared participation by Iran—which had been proposed by Annan—a “red line” that would result in a US boycott.

If the aim was a negotiated peace agreement, the presence of Iran, Syria's principal regional ally, would seem indispensable. That, however, is not what the US has in mind. It is determined to bring about regime-change, no matter how many Syrian lives it costs. Moreover, it sees the creation of a puppet state in Syria as a stepping stone to a wider and potentially far bloodier campaign to overturn the government of Iran as well. The attempts to overturn the regimes in both Syria and Iran lead inevitably to a conflict with Russia and China, which view these countries as strategic partners.

Having waged two major wars over the past decade, in Afghanistan and Iraq, US imperialism has embarked on a seemingly endless series of military interventions—from Libya to Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and Syria—aimed at establishing American hegemony over the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

This campaign of aggression is an attempt to offset the economic decline of American capitalism, which has only intensified as a result of the economic crisis unleashed by the financial meltdown of 2008, by making use of its residual military might.

As the bitter experiences of the 20th century have proven, the attempts of imperialist powers to re-divide the world at the expense of their rivals lead inexorably to world war.

These are the real stakes in Syria. The working class must oppose the US-led intervention on the principled basis that settling accounts with the Assad regime is the

task of the working class, not the predatory imperialist powers that are seeking to foment a sectarian war in order to further the colonial-style subjugation of the entire region.

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