

# Imperialist powers unveil their proposed Syrian military strongman

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This week, Syrian General Manaf Tlass was mooted as the head of a proposed interim national unity government, to be installed if the US and its allies succeed in overthrowing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Tlass only defected on July 6. Before that he was a general in the elite 104<sup>th</sup> brigade of the Republican Guard. The son of a former defence minister, he was for years Assad's right-hand man, helping strengthen ties with Syria's Sunni business community.

Behind the scenes he is being sponsored by Washington. The *Wall Street Journal* reported, "The Obama administration and officials of some Arab and Western nations are discussing ways to place Syria's highest-ranking military defector at the center of a political transition in the Arab state, according to US and Middle East officials."

Tlass read a prepared statement on Saudi-based *Al-Arabiya* television, calling for unity and stressing that he was speaking as "one of the sons of the Syrian Arab Army" who could reach out to "honourable troops" that must now become "the extension of the [opposition] Free Syrian Army."

He was on a pilgrimage to Mecca aimed at reinforcing his Islamic credentials. His trip was arranged by Saudi Arabia's new head of intelligence, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan.

Whether or not his power grab is successful, the backing Tlass has received blows a hole in all attempts to portray the anticipated overthrow of Assad as the dawn of a new democratic era. The US, France, Britain and other imperialist powers want Assad eliminated because he is seen as too dependent upon Iran. Their goal is to impose an equally militarist and authoritarian regime, but one that is under their control.

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is split on whether to endorse Tlass. Last week SNC leader Abdel Basset Sayda revealed its plan for a post-Assad regime. The SNC would lead an interim government with the help of the military, to "guarantee the security of the country and its unity once the regime falls."

The class character of this proposal is largely identical to that of plans to install Tlass. Islamist and pro-imperialist parties, representing various bourgeois factions, would act as a front for a military regime that would keep itself in power by brutally suppressing the ethnic and sectarian tensions exacerbated by the US intervention.

And if Tlass proves too controversial a figure to head such a regime, there are other candidates. Syrian commentator Hassan Hassan noted in the *Guardian* that the importance of Nawaf al-Fares, the former Syrian envoy in Iraq, is rooted in efforts to utilise tribal ties to establish spheres of influence. His eastern clan is part of the dominant Egaidat tribal confederation, which has at least 1.5 million members across 40 percent of Syria's territory and "kinship links to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar."

The mooted Tlass is only the latest initiative by the major powers and their regional allies, the Gulf States and Turkey, which oversee the SNC and other "opposition" forces.

*Foreign Policy* magazine reported that for at least six months, 40 senior Syrian "opposition" groups have met in Germany under the aegis of the US Institute for Peace (USIP) to make plans for a post-Assad Syrian government. The project leader is Georgetown University academic Steven Heydemann, but the USIP is funded by the State Department. "This is a situation

where too visible a US role would have been deeply counterproductive,” Heydemann said.

In a February article for *Foreign Policy*, he urged that, “the Friends [of Syria] Group should move quickly to establish a single, centralized body overseeing the training and equipping of the armed opposition. Inevitably, this will involve a significant role for Turkey, which currently hosts the FSA in areas along the Syrian border.”

This proposal has been fully implemented. Reuters revealed Friday that Turkey has set up a secret base, working with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to direct, arm and train the opposition. Its staff includes 20 former Syrian generals.

Advancing a military strongman is part of an attempt to suppress the very forces that the major powers have mobilised against Assad—Islamists, including not only the Muslim Brotherhood but also Al-Qaeda and other Salafist groups armed and financed by the Gulf states.

The nominally liberal media now openly discusses the sectarian nature of the conflict they have backed from its inception and the danger of a bloodbath after Assad’s downfall. Referring to Tlass, the *Guardian*’s Martin Chulov concluded that given the “potential balkanisation of Syria, which would possibly be linked to outright sectarian war... One way to avoid the abyss is the anointing of a hardman to take over.”

But the liberal media is not alone in supporting the installation of a military regime through a proxy war waged by the western powers. This week, Britain’s Socialist Workers Party warns that “the longer the fighting continues, the bigger the danger will be of foreign powers stepping in to hijack the revolution.”

This possibility was always ridiculed by the pseudo-left SWP, and even now it never explains that such a “hijack” is made possible precisely due to the class forces leading the opposition to Assad and the absence of an independent mobilisation of the working class.

SWP leader Alex Callinicos goes further. While proclaiming cynically that “We may regret the absence of the independent working class action,” he insists, “The idea that Syria is being ‘recolonised’ implies that it is a long-standing Western priority to remove the

Assad regime. But there is no evidence of this... Those in the Western left who allow a reflexive and unthinking ‘anti-imperialism’ to set them against the Syrian revolution are simply confessing their own bankruptcy.”

Callinicos and his ilk within the ex-left tendencies are far more than political bankrupts. The “revolution” they are backing is of a right-wing pro-imperialist character—and they know it.

The denunciation of “reflexive” opposition to imperialism comes from a man with intimate personal and political ties to Britain’s ruling elite and to right-wing bourgeois forces in the Middle East like the Muslim Brotherhood. He heads a party with a privileged petty-bourgeois membership, whose social and political outlook is fundamentally the same as the layers catered for by the *Guardian*. His is, in short, an authentic voice of the counter-revolution.

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