

Anti-US protests spark internal policy debate over American war drive in Syria

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The mass protests at US embassies throughout the Muslim world over the last week have impacted the US and European proxy war in Syria.

American cable and broadcast news programs have largely dropped coverage of Syria, while foreign policy experts in the West and the Middle East have initiated a debate over how best to continue the war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Petty-bourgeois “left” parties that have supported the US proxy war, such as France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and the American International Socialist Organization (ISO), have likewise fallen silent on Syria since the anti-US protests broke out on September 11.

These pseudo-left forces are awaiting the outcome of the debate within the US foreign policy establishment so they can receive a clear line from the State Department and the bourgeois media. This debate underscores the cynical character of Washington’s support for the so-called “rebels” in Syria and, more broadly, the policies pursued by the US since working class uprisings toppled US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia early last year in the so-called “Arab Spring.”

In part, the debate reflects anger in state circles over the killing in Benghazi of the US ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens. This attack, which came as protests began throughout the Middle East on September 11, is now blamed on the Ansar al-Shariah brigade, an Al Qaeda-linked militia that fought for the US against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

The death of Stevens and three other Americans in the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi has thrown into question the US policy of relying on Al Qaeda-type forces in Syria.

In Benghazi, Ansar al-Shariah guards Al Jala hospital and has carried out the desecration of Sufi Muslim

shrines, which it views as idolatrous. Ansar al-Shariah leader Mohammad Ali al-Zahawi has denied that his group killed Stevens. Interviewed by the BBC in Benghazi, however, he said that he approved of Al Qaeda’s strategy because it “is aimed at weakening US hegemony on the Muslim nation.”

He added that he was fighting “secularists” and “Gaddafi loyalists” in the new, US-backed Libyan government.

He suggested that he did not object to US imperialist operations in the region, but only to US insults to Islam: “I swear by God that we can tolerate the killing of all people and wiping all countries off the map, but we cannot tolerate a single swear word that could hurt our prophet.”

US strategists are discussing the risk that militarily overthrowing Assad would, as with the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, lead to social chaos and the growth of Sunni terrorist forces. Brian Katulis, an official of the Obama administration-linked Center for American Progress, told the *New York Times*: “These incidents further will give people pause, because already our intelligence agencies have been telling us that amongst the Syrian opposition—the people who we’re supposed to support—some of them are Al Qaeda affiliates.”

More broadly, however, Washington fears rising popular opposition to the Syrian war and to US Middle East policy. Some 55 percent of Americans and 59 percent of European Union (EU) residents oppose military intervention in Syria, while opposition in several key Near Eastern states is even higher.

In Turkey, a state that borders Syria and whose support would be critical to any US invasion of Syria, recent polls found that only 22 percent of the population would support a war. There is deep anger at

the sudden shift in Turkish foreign policy to hosting US proxy forces fighting Assad, with whom the Turkish government had maintained close relations until last year. Turkey already faces a refugee crisis as Syrians flee the fighting. At the same time, there has been a surge of clashes with Kurdish guerrillas in Turkey, which have claimed some 700 lives.

There are reports that Iran is helping Kurdish guerrillas in Turkey in retaliation for the proxy war the US is waging against Syria, an Iranian ally.

In Lebanon, where up to 500,000 protesters marched Monday in a protest called by the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Shiite organization Hezbollah, thousands marched yesterday in anti-US protests in Tyre.

In Egypt, the US-backed regime of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi is re-introducing emergency laws abolished after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak last year, in a bid to quash strikes and protests targeting the US embassy. (See also: "Egyptian President Mursi cracks down after US embassy protests".)

This upsurge of popular opposition to Washington has thrown into question the strategy the Obama administration fashioned after the outbreak of the Arab Spring: orchestrating a change of personnel at the top of US-backed regimes and targeting other countries for war and regime-change, all in the name of "democracy." US imperialist interests in the region may be better served, some US strategists are arguing, by simply relying on the existing regimes to crush any expression of popular opposition.

This could be US policy not only in Egypt, but also in Syria, were it to be possible to keep Assad in power. Thus, the *New York Times* asked, "Should the United States and its allies remain wary of toppling Mr. Assad, one of the region's last secular dictators, whose rule, however repressive, has kept the forces of populist Islam in check?"

On Tuesday, British Foreign Secretary William Hague admitted to the British Parliament's foreign affairs committee that he saw "major disadvantages" to military intervention. He said, "It would require intervention on a vastly greater scale than was the case in Libya, with no prospect at the moment of agreement at the UN Security Council, and would require the full involvement of the United States."

In fact, a direct imperialist intervention in Syria would be a crime on the scale of the US invasion of

Iraq in 2003, which led to over a million Iraqi deaths. As Russia and China have pledged to veto UN Security Council resolutions authorizing war against Syria, it would be carried out in overt violation of international law, as was the case in Iraq.

Nonetheless, as Hague's comments make clear, this option is still being actively considered. French President François Hollande has already suggested that Paris might be prepared to help invade Syria without UN approval. (See also: French President Hollande calls for formation of Syrian opposition government)

Such a war would threaten to spread throughout the entire Middle East, especially amid an escalating campaign of US and Israeli threats against Iran. The Iranian regime, for its part, has continued making statements of support for the Assad regime.

Yesterday, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi visited Assad in Damascus, saying that a solution to the war could come "only in Syria and within the Syrian family."

On Sunday, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari said that the IRGC's elite Qods Force had sent troops to Syria. He said, "In comparison with the scale of support the Arab countries have given to opposition groups in Syria and their military presence, we haven't taken any action there. We have only given intellectual and advisory help and transferred experience." He said Iranian forces were also present in Lebanon.

Iran and Syria have a bilateral security agreement, though Jafari said Iran's reaction to an attack on Syria would depend on "conditions."

Yesterday, US Senator John Kerry demanded that the Iraqi regime inspect Iranian flights to Syria that use Iraqi airspace, to prove that Tehran is sending arms. "It just seems completely inappropriate that we're trying to help build their democracy, support them, put American lives on the line, money into the country, and they're working against our interests," he said.



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