

The Middle East in 2013

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The workers and oppressed of the Middle East face the prospect of bloody sectarian warfare, state repression and a continued descent into grinding poverty. Everything depends upon renewing the revolutionary upsurge that began in 2011, but this time based upon a programme that articulates the independent political interests of the working class.

Two years on, the naïve illusions that accompanied the “Arab Spring”—the belief that all classes in the Middle East shared a desire for democracy that was backed by the major powers—have been dashed.

2013 began with the despatch of six batteries of Patriot missiles to the Turkish-Syrian border. This is the clearest indication yet that the world is on the brink of a military intervention by the United States and its NATO allies into the sectarian civil war they have deliberately engineered.

The missiles are accompanied by close to 1,200 troops, complementing the tens of thousands already stationed in Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, as well as the Special Forces and intelligence operatives on the ground in Syria. Seventeen warships from the US, Britain and France are now in the waters off Syria. Western military forces are there to back up any intervention by Turkey and the Gulf monarchies through which Washington is working.

Even without overt military aggression, the Western powers have committed an appalling crime by sponsoring a Sunni insurgency encompassing the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda-style movements such as Jabhat al-Nusra. The price paid for this imperialist scheming has been tens of thousands dead and wounded and the destruction of Syria’s economy and infrastructure.

The United Nations has been forced to acknowledge the reality of a sectarian civil war threatening entire communities with Yugoslav-style ethnic cleansing at

the risk of death. But this admission will only be used as an argument for intervention. The mainstream media functions as little more than a sounding board for war propaganda, ignoring the US alliance with Al Qaeda and following the zigzag path of first accusing the Assad regime of preparing to use chemical and ballistic weapons and then warning of the dangers posed by opposition forces seizing these weapons.

The downfall of the Assad regime would bring no respite. It would be replaced by a brutal government that would pursue a vendetta against Alawites, Christians and other minorities, which could end in the breakup of the state into ethnic cantons. Libya is a warning, with Prime Minister Ali Zeidan threatening this week to “use force to protect the state” in the face of conflicts between rival cliques over control of vital oil supplies.

Assad’s downfall is a key element in longstanding US efforts to secure hegemony in the Middle East that were dramatically stepped up in response to the overturn in 2011 of its key regional allies Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. US policy combines aggressive military intervention such as that carried out in Libya with securing an alliance of Sunni Arab regimes and movements against the Shiite theocracy in Iran and its allies. The goal is to secure regime-change in Damascus and Tehran, sow divisions throughout the region to prevent common action by the working class, and to build up the authority of the Islamists as a bulwark against social revolution.

To this end, Washington champions the democratic credentials of the Syrian opposition while backing the suppression of opposition to its allies in Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, et al. In the process, Washington ensures that these regimes become politically and militarily dependent on the US, ready to act as a block to the regional ambitions of Tehran, Moscow and Beijing.

To this end, the Obama administration is currently supplying Egypt with 200 M1A1 Abrams battle tanks and 20 F-16 fighter jets in a contract agreed under Mubarak. This month it provided Lebanon with 200 additional M113 armoured personnel carriers (APCs), boosting the army's total to 1,200 APCs, with the stated aim of strengthening the armed forces' ability to "protect borders and internal stability."

Iran is presently the target of sanctions that are having a crippling and destabilising impact—leading to a 55 percent fall in crucial oil imports and a collapse in the value of its currency. But a military strike has been repeatedly threatened by Israel.

There is no country in the Middle East where despotic regimes do not face growing popular opposition. But there is nowhere that the working class has been able to assert its political will, rather than being trapped behind groupings representing contending factions of the ruling elite—Islamist, nationalist or liberal. If this is not challenged, the sectarian nightmare that has been created in Syria can and will be repeated in Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon and Turkey.

The basic impulse for the overthrow of Mubarak came from the working class. It was when millions of workers moved into struggle to redress decades of social and political oppression that Mubarak was ditched by the regime. But today, nearly 25 percent of Egypt's 80 million population is in desperate poverty, as inflation skyrockets and President Morsi is set to impose savage cuts under instructions from the International Monetary Fund.

None of this concerns the bourgeois liberal opposition, whose aim is to secure their own position in the new political and economic setup alongside the Brotherhood and the military. The same basic impulse animates every bourgeois oppositional current in the Middle East—to secure their own right to exploit workers and their own connections with the Western powers and the transnational corporations and banks.

The central political task before the region's workers and young people is to forge a unified socialist movement against the ruling regimes, as well as their bourgeois rivals and the imperialist powers funding them both. The goal of the working class, mobilising the poor farmers and oppressed middle-class layers, must be the formation of the United Socialist States of

the Middle East through the construction of their own independent revolutionary party based on Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

Workers in the United States and Europe must do all in their power to oppose the predatory aims of their governments and ruling elites in the Middle East. For this, a new antiwar movement must be built, in direct opposition to the various petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties affiliated to the United Secretariat and the International Socialists that now act as advocates of imperialist-inspired regime-change led by CIA assets, ex-regime figures and Islamists backed by NATO firepower.

Denunciations of "knee-jerk anti-imperialism" have become de rigueur in these circles, with opponents of military intervention denounced by one Pham Binh for being "*at odds* with the interests and explicit demands of first the Libyan and now the Syrian revolutionary peoples," who, in the words of the US International Socialist Organisation, "will take whatever help they can get."

These tendencies have all entered the camp of imperialist reaction. The responsibility for leading an antiwar movement and giving voice to the anti-imperialist and socialist strivings of the working class falls to the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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