

US inflames sectarian tensions to escalate war in Syria

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In the run-up to today's G8 summit in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, which is expected to focus on the Syrian war, US and European officials are calling for an escalation of the imperialist drive for regime-change. With US-backed Sunni Islamist opposition forces facing defeat within the country, Washington is seeking to inflame Sunni-Shiite tensions throughout the region.

British Prime Minister David Cameron met yesterday in London with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the main international backer, together with Iran, of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. He made clear that Washington and its allies would move to attack Syria with or without Russian support—doing an end run around the United Nations to launch a war in open violation of international law.

Cameron admitted that the Syrian opposition included elements “that are deeply unsavory, that are very dangerous, very extremist,” but said Moscow did not have a “veto” against moves to further arm them.

White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough pledged yesterday that the “scope and scale” of US involvement would expand. US lawmakers also called for intensified military action, including the imposition of a no-fly-zone, which would entail a massive bombing campaign aimed at destroying Syria's air defenses.

“We need to create a no-fly-zone. We cannot take air power out of the equation,” said Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican of South Carolina). He also called for arming opposition fighters in Syria with heavy weapons. “The whole region is about to blow up,” he said. “If we don't do more than add AK-47s into the mix, [Assad] will continue to win. And the King of Jordan will be toast.”

The rapid move towards a full-scale war in Syria is shattering the pretenses that the war is a humanitarian

exercise to install a democratic government. Instead, Washington is moving to stoke up a sectarian civil war throughout the Middle East.

It aims to rally right-wing Sunni Islamist regimes throughout the region for a war aimed firstly at the Alawite-led Syrian regime, but aimed ultimately at the destruction of all of Assad's allies in the region—including the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah and the Shiite regime in Iran.

The US-backed Islamist regime in Egypt announced that it would break off all diplomatic relations with Syria on Saturday. Addressing a “Support for Syria” meeting called by Sunni Islamist clerics in Cairo, Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi also stated that he would back a no-fly zone against Syria. Denouncing Hezbollah, he said Egypt would “materially and morally” support the Syrian opposition, adding that “the Egyptian nation, its leadership and its army will not abandon the Syrian people until it achieves its rights and dignity.”

This week, Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) echoed calls from Sunni Islamist organizations to join “jihad” in Syria. A Mursi aide stated that the Egyptian government would not stop Egyptians who seek to join the fighting in Syria.

An official Syrian source replied that “Mohammad Morsi, by cutting off all ties with Syria yesterday, had joined the Israel-US-led band of conspirators. It called Egypt's decisions “irresponsible,” accusing Mursi of fueling sectarian conflict in Syria and throughout the region.

Since Mursi became Egypt's new president last summer, he has served as a reliable US stooge, working in close consultation with Washington. After supporting the Israeli onslaught against Gaza last autumn, Mursi now seeks to strengthen his ties to

Washington by supporting another imperialist war in the Middle East.

On Thursday, a conference of 70 Sunni religious organizations in Cairo issued a statement calling for “jihad with mind, money, weapons—all forms of jihad.” Muslim Brotherhood-linked preacher Youssef al-Qaradawi had already issued appeals for Sunni fighters to travel to fight in Syria.

Over the weekend, US troops were engaged in Eager Lion military exercises in Jordan, near the Syrian border, and left behind F-16 jets and Patriot missiles that will be permanently stationed in Jordan. That country has already been proposed as a base from which Washington could launch ground attacks into Syria. (See: US deploys troops to Jordan, prepares to invade Syria). Besides the US and its NATO allies, Sunni Islamist regimes including Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt participated in the exercises.

Yesterday, Germany’s *Der Spiegel* reported that France is helping Saudi Arabia provide portable “Mistral” anti-aircraft missiles to Syrian opposition fighters.

In a recent piece entitled “Syria: The Need for Decisive US Action,” Anthony Cordesman, the leading strategist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) think tank, laid out the imperialist interests driving Washington’s policy of stoking up sectarian conflict in the Middle East.

He began by noting that “the ‘discovery’ that Syria used chemical weapons may well be a political ploy.” He thereby all but acknowledged that US allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use, which are being used as a pretext to escalate the war, are fabrications.

Cordesman nonetheless defended the war as critical to Washington’s strategic interests and necessary to prevent a dramatic erosion of US influence in the Middle East. He wrote: “Our friends in the Arab world—and many in Israel and outside the Middle East—see the United States as having been defeated in Iraq and having to ‘retrograde’ from Afghanistan.”

He continued: “The grim reality is that the Syrian civil war is part of a far broader power struggle that now ties the Levant and the [Persian] Gulf together, can greatly aid Iran, can further divide Islam between Sunnis and minorities like Shiites and Alawites, and affects every US friend and ally in the region. This does

not in any way eliminate the risks in supporting and arming the Syrian rebels or guarantee that Assad’s fall will end every aspect of the broader humanitarian crisis in Syria. But this set of worst cases is now far more acceptable than an Assad victory.”

This comment reflects the ruthlessness and consummate cynicism with which US strategists pursue Washington’s imperialist interests in the region. Among themselves, they place no importance on allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use, or the risk of causing hundreds of thousands of Syrian casualties—which they see as a perfectly acceptable method to pursue their policies.

They are also well aware of the bloody consequences of supporting Al Qaeda-linked groups that dominate the Syrian opposition’s armed forces, including the fact that Syria would likely dissolve into sectarian civil war if these forces toppled Assad. Such bloodshed is “far more acceptable” to US imperialism than the blow to its prestige which the Assad regime’s survival would entail.

Elements of the European bourgeoisie are also pressing for an aggressive US policy. On Saturday, Germany’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote that Obama’s current policy “leaves a dramatic impression of weakness. Governments around the world, America’s friends as well as its enemies, will register these weaknesses—with either joy or horror.”



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