Syrian war threatens regional sectarian bloodbath

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In the past weeks, Washington's strategy in the Middle East has emerged very clearly: it aims to exploit sectarian divisions, particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, to restructure the Middle East in its interests.

The US has mobilized a collection of Sunni Islamist guerrilla forces, in which Al Qaeda-linked forces play a major role, to fight the Shia Alawite-led regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It now sees stoking up religious tensions in the region as the best way to build a broader base for a policy of isolating and targeting Iran—a Shia-dominated state allied to Shia-led Arab regimes in Syria, Iraq, and to the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah.

The past month has witnessed:

* Egypt's Islamist President Mohamed Mursi cut off diplomatic relations with Syria this week, after Egypt hosted a meeting of 70 Sunni religious organizations in Cairo that issued a statement calling for "jihad with mind, money, weapons—all forms of jihad."

* Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, who attended the Cairo meeting, had already issued a global appeal for Sunnis to wage holy war in Syria. "Every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that must make himself available … How could 100 million Shia defeat 1.7 billion Sunnis? Only because [Sunni] Muslims are weak," he stated.

* In Turkey, Washington is backing Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as he moves to brutally crush protests against his Islamist government, including its support for the Syrian war.

*In Saudi Arabia, where tens of thousands of Lebanese Shia live, the monarchy plans to expel Hezbollah supporters in retaliation for Hezbollah's support for Assad.

The horrific implications of Washington's policy were recognized even by former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia Peter Galbraith, who commented: "The next genocide in the world will likely be against the Alawites in Syria."

Two major concerns are driving American imperialist policy: firstly, to block the radicalization of the masses and the coalescence of revolutionary struggles of the working class, as occurred in 2011 against US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia; and secondly, to forcibly establish its unchallenged hegemony over this strategic, oil-rich region. Since 2011, the US has gone to war first in Libya, then in Syria.

While opposition detachments backed by NATO Special Forces and warplanes succeeded in toppling the Libyan regime and murdering Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the Assad government in Damascus has proven too powerful for Islamist militias to overcome.

Masses of workers sense that the incitement of sectarian tensions will have catastrophic consequences. Recent polls show that only 15 percent of Americans support escalating aid to the Syrian opposition, and 28 percent of Turks support Erdogan's war policy. A Pew Research Center poll last month found 80 percent of Lebanese were hostile to the US arming the Syrian opposition—including 66 percent of Lebanese Sunnis—along with 59 percent of Egyptians and 60 percent of Tunisians.

The basis of anti-imperialist strategy is the fight to unify the working class in a common revolutionary struggle against war. This struggle, anticipated by the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, can only proceed on the basis of an international struggle for socialism and for workers' power, across all ethnic and sectarian lines.

Contrary to media accounts of the Middle East that portray it as seething with religious hatreds, there is a

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long tradition of socialist struggles by the working class of the Middle East. After World War II, there were mass Communist parties in all the region's major states—in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and beyond. The tragedy is that these parties were dominated by Stalinist leaderships that entered into counter-revolutionary political alliances with Middle Eastern bourgeois national leaderships, such as the Syrian Baathist regime of Assad.

This led to disaster in one country after another, as Washington and its European imperialist allies were able to manipulate ethno-sectarian tensions and promote right-wing Islamist forces, from the Sunni mujahedin of the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war, out of which Al Qaeda emerged, to the Al Qaeda-linked Islamists of today's Libyan and Syrian wars.

In the current period of intensifying political and economic crisis, the possibility arises again to build new socialist leaderships in the working class.

The Trotskyist movement's fight against the betrayals of Stalinism is continued in the struggle by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the reactionary, pro-imperialist politics of the pseudo-left—parties like the International Socialist Organization in the US, France's New Anti-capitalist Party, Britain's Socialist Workers Party, Germany's Left Party, and Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists. They hailed the installation of counter-revolutionary Islamist regimes in Egypt and Tunisia as a step forward for democracy, and the imperialist wars in Libya and Syria as "revolutions."

They bear direct responsibility for the sectarian-based bloodbath that now threatens the Middle East. It is on the basis of the ICFI's struggle against their pro-imperialist politics that a socialist movement in the Middle East will be rebuilt.

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