

Mursi's downfall impacts on US campaign for regime change in Syria

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The July 3 army coup that brought down Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood-backed government has significant ramifications for US imperialism's campaign to depose Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

The US cultivation of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist forces as the basis for securing its interest throughout the Middle East now threatens to spread civil war conditions to Egypt itself.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, Washington had pinned its hopes upon Islamist forces to stabilise the situation after the fall of Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The Syrian Brotherhood was one of the "moderate" Islamist tendencies that the Obama administration held up as a means of checking the influence of the Al-Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front and other Salafist groups.

Thus, on May 15, the influential Carnegie Endowment think-tank ran a piece by Raphaël Lefèvre, declaring the Brotherhood to be "Syria's best organized opposition group... The Brotherhood will be the center of gravity of any broad Islamist coalition, and its rising profile inside the country is shifting the Islamic spectrum back to the center."

Egypt is now engulfed in a factional conflict between the military junta and supporters of the Brotherhood, playing amid mass mobilisations of the working class that threaten the very foundations of Egyptian capitalism.

The Egyptian military has stood fully behind US efforts at regime change—first in Libya and now Syria—reliant as it is upon Washington for its existence. However, the military was concerned with the Brotherhood openly casting the Syrian war as a jihad, particularly amid rising popular opposition to Mursi's pro-US stance in Egypt, where the Islamists and the

army leadership represent powerful rival sections of the capitalist class.

The Brotherhood's spiritual leader, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, was the first to call for Sunnis to wage jihad in Syria against Alawites and Shia. Then on June 15, Mursi took part in a 20,000-strong rally called by Sunni clerics in Cairo, during which he said he had cut all diplomatic ties with Syria. He added that he backed imposing a no-fly zone that would be the beginning of direct intervention in Syria by Washington and its allies in Europe and the Middle East.

He clearly surmised that this stance would please the US, which had publicly shifted to a policy of arming the insurgency. However, the speech was reported to have been a "tipping point" and a "national security red line" for many generals, according to military sources. "The armed forces were very alarmed by the Syrian conference at a time the state was going through a major political crisis," said one officer.

Yasser El-Shimy, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, said that Mursi's call risked creating a new generation of jihadists in Egypt, the homeland of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri.

Faced with the eruption of potentially revolutionary struggles in Egypt, the Obama administration had to choose whether to remain loyal to Mursi and the Brotherhood or to rely on its historic ties to Egypt's long-time rulers, the army. It sided with the army.

Assad himself has concluded from this that the US-led efforts to depose him are unravelling. Speaking July 4 to the pro-government *Al Thawra* newspaper, he went so far as to proclaim the downfall of "political Islam" as a model and predicted victory in the civil war.

His Islamist opponents had sought to destroy Syria and create "a failed state," he said, but had failed to do so. Now, only direct foreign intervention would change

the situation, “But there is hesitation and rejection from most countries so if we can overcome this stage with resoluteness and awareness, we have nothing more to fear.”

The US certainly faces mounting difficulties, but Assad’s claims that the US offensive in Syria has been all but defeated are a delusion. Regime change in Syria and Iran remains Washington’s strategic goal, and it maintains its alliance with numerous Islamist regimes, whatever the immediate fate of Mursi and the problems besetting the Muslim Brotherhood in the region.

The attitude among US allies to Mursi’s downfall is by no means universal. Some are openly hostile, while others are less so—depending upon how they believe their domestic and foreign policy interests are best served.

Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the toppling of Mursi. “Coups are clearly enemies of democracy”, he told parliament, attacking the West for having “failed the sincerity test” for failing to describe Mursi’s ouster as a coup.

Erdogan, who heads the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been in a constant struggle with his country’s secular-nationalist military since coming to power in 2002. He has arrested hundreds of army officers accused of coup plots. He faces mass popular opposition in recent weeks which, though nowhere near the scale of Egypt, also opposed the Islamisation of Turkey’s hitherto secular society.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are generally seen as supportive of the Brotherhood, but the actual situation is more complex.

In Syria, Saudi Arabia has backed carefully selected groups in consultation with Washington so as not to help those, such as the Brotherhood, that are deemed a possible threat to its security. Like Bahrain, it must also contend with a large, oppressed Shia population inside its border.

Qatar has, until now, openly supported the Brotherhood, as well as many others including the Al Nusra Front. Its satellite station Al Jazeera regularly broadcast the sermons of al-Qaradawi and was closed down by Egypt’s generals.

However, Riyadh and Doha both made a point of congratulating interim Prime Minister Adly Mansour after he was installed by the SCAF.

On July 2, two days before Mursi’s ouster, the United

Arab Emirates imprisoned 68 members of the Brotherhood-linked al-Islah, accused of a plot to overthrow the government—most for between seven and ten years. Another 26, including 13 women, were acquitted. Eight defendants no longer in the country were sentenced to 15 years. The defendants were part of a growing oppositional movement in the country.

Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition continues to court Western support amid efforts by the contending regional powers to secure their own dominance. The Syrian National Coalition meeting in Turkey this week elected Ahmad Jarba, a tribal leader from north-eastern Syria, as its new president.

Jarba is allied to Saudi Arabia and therefore hostile to the Brotherhood. He narrowly defeated Mustafa Sabbagh, a businessman and ally of Qatar. Mohammed Farouk Tayfour of the Brotherhood was elected one of three vice presidents. The SNC once again appealed to the Western powers and the United Nations “to intervene immediately” to aid the besieged city of Homs, the key opposition stronghold.



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