The New York Times pronounces on destabilisation of the Middle East

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With Syria's Western-backed sectarian war for regime-change spilling over into both Iraq and Lebanon between forces that root themselves in divisions between Sunni and Shia, the *New York Times* has come forward to attribute this nightmare scenario to Washington's insufficient engagement in the region.

"Power Vacuum in Middle East Lifts Militants," declares the voice of liberal imperialism in a January 4 article.

The US "newspaper of record" cites fighting in the Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi involving "masked gunmen" whom "so many American soldiers died fighting."

It attributes all conflicts in the region to "the emergence of a post-American Middle East in which no broker has the power, or the will, to contain the region's sectarian hatreds."

It is this, we are told, which has allowed "fanatical Islamists" to flourish in both Iraq and Syria. The *Times* further attributes this situation to struggles between "two great oil powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose rulers—claiming to represent Shiite and Sunni Islam, respectively—cynically deploy a sectarian agenda that makes almost any sort of accommodation a heresy."

"Linking all this mayhem is an increasingly naked appeal to the atavistic loyalties of clan and sect," the *Times* adds.

The newspaper makes a fleeting reference to the United States having "touched off" civil war in Iraq with an invasion that is then justified as an "American nation-building effort."

This explanation of the unfolding events in the Middle East amounts to a willful and self-serving falsification of history.

Blame for the escalating crisis lies at the door of the White House, not because of a failed policy, but because of its ongoing and historic efforts to dominate the region and its oil riches.

The first Gulf War in 1990, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 2011 war in Libya and the subsequent efforts to topple the Assad regime in Syria were all aimed at eliminating Iraq and Iran as regional powers and ensuring undisputed US hegemony. In every instance, the US has been at the forefront of encouraging and fostering "atavistic loyalties of clan and sect" through a policy of building fronts of regional powers as proxy forces to fashion the Middle East to its liking.

Citing the "Shia arc of extremism," the US responded to the overthrow of its client regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 by toppling the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt, and then assembling a coalition of Sunni powers led by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to move against the Baathist regime in Syria as a precursor to action against Iran. The opposition forces they built up in Syria were based on a core of Al Qaeda-linked Islamists.

The policy proved a terrible failure from which the US is now suffering blowback on a massive scale. This is what has generated the complaints voiced by the *New York Times*. Faced with overwhelming domestic opposition to war and the threat of a direct conflict with Russia, the US seized on the Russian-brokered deal for Syria's chemical disarmament and Iran's subsequent offer of a rapprochement as a an alternative means of asserting its interests.

This has both alienated and thrown into political crisis its former regional allies.

Turkey, for example, wanted to establish itself as regional powerhouse, with Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's Justice and Development Party advanced as an Islamist model for other pro-Western regimes. But

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the US abandoning support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and then its retreat on war against Syria has destabilised Erdogan, who accuses Washington of sponsoring a coup attempt against him led by Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylvania-based Muslim cleric.

Saudi Arabia has declared that it will now follow a path independent of Washington in Syria and internationally, refusing a seat on the United Nations Security Council in protest against the shift on Syria and the US opening nuclear talks with Iran. Saudi's London ambassador, Prince Mohammed bin Nawwaf, wrote in the *New York Times* December 17, "This means the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has no choice but to become more assertive in international affairs …We will act to fulfil these responsibilities, with or without the support of our Western partners."

The prince cited the Saudi monarchy's continued arming of the Syrian opposition as proof of its independence. He could have also raised its involvement in the fighting in Iraq. It is there that the shift in US policy is best exemplified, where Washington is now arming the Shia and pro-Iranian regime of Nour al-Maliki with 36 Lockheed Martin F-16IQ Block 52 fighters to combat the same Sunni Al Qaeda forces that were, until recently, employed as its proxies in neighbouring Syria.

In alliance with a new imperialist partner, Saudi Arabia has pledged a massive $3 billion to pay for weapons being supplied by the government of French President Francois Hollande to the Lebanese army in order to target Hezbollah, an ally of Iran and Syria

These sordid manoeuvres prove only that every imperialist power abides by Lord Palmerston's injunction, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."

What is taking place in the Middle East is naked imperialist power politics, in which it is entirely possible that, at least for a time, yesterday's enemies can become today's allies and vice-versa.

However, whether or not the Middle Eastern regimes occasionally portray themselves as "anti-imperialist" is solely conditioned by tactical considerations, above all the need to pose as such before their own populations. To the extent that any of the region's bourgeois powers find themselves in conflict with the US, they desire nothing more than an accommodation that allows them to continue to preside over the exploitation of the working class and rural poor.

Sectarianism and clan rivalries are not atavistic survivals of a bygone era. They are utilised as an instrument for maintaining a grip over the workers and peasants and fostering support for contending bourgeois regimes. This has been given additional weight by the failure of secular nationalist movements and regimes—in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Palestine—to provide a genuine and viable means of combating foreign domination and securing social progress.

The Middle East today stands first of all as proof of the malignant role of imperialism in forcing the mass of the world's people to suffer grinding poverty, brutal levels of exploitation and the ever growing danger of war. Secondly, it is stark confirmation of the inability of the national bourgeoisie to oppose imperialist oppression.

The only consistently anti-imperialist force in the world is the international working class. The fundamental task facing the workers of the Middle East is the construction of a new socialist movement that makes its appeal across all artificial national and religious distinctions. In turn, workers in the US and other imperialist countries must reject with contempt the cynical efforts by the *New York Times* et al. to legitimise or conceal their governments' predatory designs on the world's strategic markets and resources through the building of a powerful socialist anti-war movement.

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