The new imperialist carve-up of the Middle East

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The events of the past week will go down in history as a milestone in the development of 21st century imperialism. In the space of a few days, the United States, Britain, and Germany escalated their military involvement in Syria, following France's intensification of its own bombing campaign in Syria last month.

The pretext for these operations are the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, followed now by the horrific mass shooting in San Bernardino, California on Wednesday. The reasons presented to the public, however, have little to do with the strategic discussions taking place in top ranks of the military and the intelligence agencies.

As tragic as the killings of 130 people in Paris and 14 in San Bernardino are, they cannot explain the sudden and convulsive military escalation by major imperialist powers in the Middle East. One should recall that in 1915, after the sinking of the RMS Lusitania with the loss of 1,198 lives, the United States refrained from entering into World War I. At that point, the American ruling class was still divided over the advisability of intervening in the Great War.

The basic force behind war in Syria is the same as that which has motivated the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East as a whole: the interests of international finance capital. The major imperialist powers know that if they are to have a say in the division of the booty, they must have also done their share of the killing.

This war drive in the Middle East is deeply unpopular, which explains the frenzied rush to utilize the recent attacks, along with an atmosphere of fear whipped up by the media, to push through actions as rapidly as possible. Consider the events of the past week:

On Tuesday, the Obama administration announced that it would deploy a new contingent of Special Operations Forces, nominally directed at the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or ISIL). At a press conference on the same day, Obama repeated that any settlement of the war in Syria had to include the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, a key ally of Russia.

On Wednesday, the British Parliament voted to support military action in Syria after Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn cleared the way for war by agreeing to a "free vote" by his party's MPs. British warplanes moved immediately to bomb targets in Syria on Wednesday night, as Prime Minister David Cameron denounced anyone opposing the war as a "terrorist sympathizer."

On Friday, the German *Bundestag* rushed through a vote to join the Syrian war with almost no discussion. The parliamentary sanctioning of war followed the decision by the government earlier in the week to send 1,200 troops, six Tornado jets and a warship to the region.

Then, over the weekend, the US media and political establishment moved to exploit the killings in San Bernardino, California to press for expanded war. The Republican presidential candidates issued belligerent statements insisting that the US faces "the next world war" (New Jersey Governor Chris Christie), that "the nation needs a wartime president" (Texas Senator Ted Cruz), and that "they have declared war on us, and we need to declare war on them" (former Florida Governor Jeb Bush).

In a speech Sunday night, Obama defended his own policy in Syria against his Republican critics, repeating his opposition to a massive deployment of ground forces in Iraq and Syria in favor of accelerated airstrikes, the funding of groups within Syria, and the

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use of troops from neighboring countries. Praising the moves of France , Germany and the UK, Obama declared, “Since attacks in Paris [on November 13], our closest allies… have ramped up their contributions to our military campaign which will help us accelerate our effort to destroy ISIL.”

As they press for war, neither Obama nor any section of the political establishment is capable of saying anything about the actual roots of ISIS, which explode the pretext of the “war on terror” that has been the foundation of US foreign policy for 15 years.

In his speech on Sunday, Obama referred obliquely to the growth of ISIS “amidst the chaos of war in Iraq and then in Syria,” as if this was unrelated to the policy of the US itself. In fact, the US and its allies first illegally occupied and devastated Iraq, then built up Islamic fundamentalist groups in Syria from which ISIS emerged as the spearhead of the war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The ISIS fighters who led the Paris attacks were able to travel freely in and out of Syria, because thousands of similar youth were traveling from Europe to Syria with the support of the authorities to join the war against Assad.

As for the San Bernardino attack, officials have cited the travel of the two shooters to Saudi Arabia and their contact with individuals in the Al Nusra Front to justify calling the shooting a terrorist attack. Saudi Arabia, the center of financing and support for Islamic fundamentalist groups throughout the Middle East, is a key US ally in the region, and the Al Nusra Front, affiliated with Al Qaeda, is the de facto ally of the US in Syria.

Rather than a response to the recent attacks, the actions of the imperialist powers are the realization of long-standing plans and ambitions. In Britain, this week’s vote reverses the 2013 vote in the House of Commons rejecting participation in a planned US-led war with the Assad regime. The German ruling class has been clamoring to play a much more active military role, to assert itself as Europe’s dominant power.

In the United States, prior to the San Bernadino attacks, there were insistent calls within the political establishment and media for the deployment of ground troops and the imposition of a no-fly zone in Syria.

Led by United States, the imperialist powers have been engaged in unending war, centered in the Middle East and Central Asia, for a quarter of a century. More than a million people have been killed, and millions more turned into refugees. After wars in Afghanistan and Iraq under the Bush administration, Obama has overseen the war in Libya and CIA-backed campaigns for regime change in Ukraine and Syria. The disastrous consequences of each operation have set the stage for an expansion and intensification of war.

What is taking place is a redivision and recolonization of the world. All the old powers are piling in to claim their share. While currently centered in the oil-rich Middle East, the conflict in Syria is developing into a proxy war with Russia. On the other side of the Eurasian landmass, the US is launching increasingly provocative actions against China in the South China Sea.

The geopolitical situation today is more explosive than at any time since the eve of World War II. Beset by an intractable economic and social crisis for which they have no progressive solution, the ruling class increasingly sees war and plunder as the only possible response.

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