

Marching toward a wider war in the Middle East

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Behind the bitter political warfare in Washington, and the endless media flogging of hysterical claims of Russian interference in the election, with the supposed collusion of Donald Trump, very real wars in the Middle East are threatening to coalesce into a regional and even global conflagration, with ominous implications for the peoples of not only the region, but the entire planet.

These two fields of battle are by no means unconnected. The US ruling establishment is bitterly divided over US foreign policy and, most decisively, its war strategy. Behind the anti-Russia hysteria, the opposition to Trump, on the part of the Democratic Party and significant layers of the Republicans, is bound up with a determination to prevent him from in any way weakening the escalation of US aggression against Moscow, in particular over Washington's drive for regime change in Syria.

The Trump administration and the cabal of recently retired and active duty military officers, who effectively steer its foreign and military policy, have spelled out with increasing clarity a policy directed at planning war with Iran, in preparation for confrontation with China. This was the unconcealed agenda of Trump's trip last month to Israel and Saudi Arabia, Tehran's two major regional enemies.

The administration's stated aim of forging an anti-Iranian, NATO-like alliance with the Sunni oil sheikdoms of the Gulf Cooperation Council, has translated into a de facto state of war imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt against Qatar, which has been subjected to an all-out economic blockade. The Saudi monarchy, the principal ideological and financial sponsor of Islamist extremism, has—with Trump's blessings—absurdly cast its attack on Qatar as a crusade against terrorism. The real issues are Qatar's ties to Tehran and its reluctance to join the anti-Iranian war drive.

Turkey, meanwhile, has sided with the Qatari regime,

sending food and taking steps toward establishing a military base on the small gas-rich Qatar Peninsula. Ankara had fallen out previously with Saudi Arabia and its allies over its opposition to the military coup that toppled Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. These tensions have been exacerbated by charges that the UAE funneled billions of dollars into Turkey to support the abortive July 2016 coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Amid this spiraling regional conflict, there is a seeming element of incoherence in the Trump administration's policy. Qatar hosts the strategically vital al-Udeid air base, along with some 10,000 US troops. The base is used to carry out airstrikes from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan, all in the name of a campaign against terrorism, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in particular.

With Iraqi forces, backed by a murderous US bombing campaign, close to conquering Mosul, a once great city turned to rubble, and Washington's Kurdish proxies advancing under similarly devastating air cover into the Syrian city of Raqqa, ISIS is being driven out of its last two major strongholds.

These apparent victories, however, spell not the end of the latest US war in the Middle East, but rather its increasingly dangerous transformation and escalation.

In a report that could accurately be characterized as “straight from the horse's mouth,” the *New York Times* published an article over the weekend titled “Beyond Raqqa, an Even Bigger Battle to Defeat ISIS and Control Syria Looms.” The author is Anne Barnard, who, since the beginning of the US-orchestrated war for regime change six years ago, has served as a faithful conduit for the CIA and Pentagon, and a cheerleader for the US-backed, Al-Qaeda-linked “rebels” employed in the attempt to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Barnard's article indicates that the Pentagon and the

CIA view the crusade against ISIS as a sideshow, a useful pretext for pursuing US imperialist interests in Syria and throughout the region. The battle against the Islamist militia, itself the product of the succession of US wars from Iraq to Libya and Syria, is being eclipsed, she writes, by a conflict in southeastern Syria “with far more geopolitical import and risk.”

Barnard refers to this unfolding military confrontation as the “21st-century version of the Great Game,” a telling historical reference to the protracted rivalry between British imperialism and the Russian empire for dominance over Central Asia. Precisely such predatory aims are involved in Syria, where Washington seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a puppet government, as a means of isolating and preparing for war against Iran, which it sees as a rival for hegemony in the energy-rich and strategically vital regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

The focus of this new stage, in a Syrian war that has killed hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees, is a desert outpost run by US and British special forces commandos in al-Tanf, Syria’s southeastern border crossing with Iraq, which controls the main highway between Damascus and Baghdad.

The Pentagon is using the base to train so-called rebels, ostensibly to fight ISIS, but in reality to turn against the Syrian regime. It has unilaterally declared a 34-mile radius surrounding the base a “deconfliction zone,” using this as the pretext for launching three separate airstrikes—the latest on June 8—against militias aligned with the Damascus government. It also recently shot down what it claimed was an armed drone operated by pro-regime forces.

Meanwhile, in the US-backed siege of ISIS-controlled Raqqa to the north, Washington’s Kurdish-dominated proxy ground forces have deliberately left ISIS an escape route to the south, so that its fighters can join in the attack on the government-held half of Deir ez-Zor, a city of 200,000 in eastern Syria.

In a blow to the unfolding US war strategy, pro-regime forces have fought their way east to the Iraqi border between the US base at al-Tanf and the ISIS-held border town of al-Bukamal, on the Euphrates river. The Pentagon has claimed that its aim is to prepare the “rebels” it is training to take the town from ISIS. This would serve to consolidate US domination of the border area, opening the way for a drive up the Euphrates and ultimately the partition of Syria, in preparation for an all-out war for regime change.

The Syrian advance has disrupted US attempts to cut off supply routes linking Syria to Iraq and, further east, to Iran. Iraqi Shiite militias, backed by Iran, have reportedly moved toward the Syrian border.

As the *New York Times* article makes clear, this is a matter of strategic importance to US imperialist aims. “[W]hat is really at stake are even larger issues. Will the Syrian government re-establish control of the country all the way to its eastern borders? Will the desert straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border remain a no man’s land ripe for militant control? If not, who will dominate there—forces aligned with Iran, Russia or the United States?”

One would never suspect that what is being described is a sovereign country. The US operation in Syria and Iraq is emerging clearly as the axis of a new imperialist carve-up of the Middle East, after a quarter century of US wars that have laid waste to much of the region, and left the rickety nation-state system imposed by the former colonial powers in shambles. Just as with earlier such colonial carve-ups, the resulting antagonisms are paving the way toward world war.

“With all these forces on a collision course, several recent escalations have raised fears of a direct confrontation between the United States and Iran, or even Russia,” the *Times* notes.

The logic of the US intervention in Syria points toward a marked escalation of US military force to reverse the tactical defeats the Pentagon has suffered on the Iraqi-Syrian border. That such an offensive may provoke a direct military confrontation with “Iran, or even Russia” will not be unwelcome to dominant layers within the US ruling establishment, who see war as the essential instrument for reversing the protracted decline of US capitalism’s global hegemony.

For masses of working people in the Middle East, the United States and across the planet, however, these developments pose a mortal threat. This threat can be answered only through the building of a mass antiwar movement, uniting the international working class on the basis of a fight to put an end to imperialism and reorganize society on socialist foundations.



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