

# Syria, the Middle East, the Arab world: No Easy Victories

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SHORTLY BEFORE THE Tea Party Republicans shut down the U.S. government over president Obama's Affordable Care Act, the president's unaffordable war act was shut down by the combined opposition of Vladimir Putin, the British parliament and the U.S. population. So no bombing of Syria, after all. Sometimes the world catches a break — and nobody got a bigger break than president Obama himself, rescued from risking what's left of his presidency on an unpopular military intervention that was almost certain to fail.

Putin, of course, is motivated by purely cynical Russian state interests. We also recognize that the suspension of the Obama-Kerry-Clinton drive to bomb Syria does nothing to resolve the carnage resulting from the Assad regime's determination to drown its population's democratic aspirations in blood. But as president Obama himself stated, U.S. bombing would not have done so either. Indeed, as the Russian government must have been terrified to contemplate, and as everyone else should be, the unintended consequence might have been to weaken the Syrian regime's command and control of its gruesome chemical weapons — which might wind up in Chechnya, Dagestan or the Moscow subway, or for that matter Lebanon or anywhere else.

Despite Moscow's evasive diplomatic cover stories, Russian intelligence must have known that the August 21 chemical attack was, in fact, perpetrated by the Syrian regime. The use of poison gas against a besieged civilian population truly is a war crime like few others. But achieving justice for the manifold atrocities of that regime is a long way off. Right now, actually getting rid of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal depends on the U.S.-Russian deal subsequently approved by the UN Security Council.

No single power could accomplish that, least of all militarily. And the United States' demand to include a threat of force in the UN resolution was bound to fail — because the Russians weren't going along with that any more than the U.S. Senate would accept repealing Obamacare.

The civil war in Syria began with a democratic popular uprising, which became militarized in the face of massive regime brutality and now confronts not only the vicious Russian and Iranian-backed Assad military but external jihadist intervention too. Religious-totalitarian fanaticism has become another powerful obstacle to the struggle for freedom in Syria, as elsewhere.

The killing and destruction appears set to continue without letup or resolution any time soon. The Syrian tragedy is also unfolding in the context of maneuvers by multiple regional and global actors. Pushing back the immediate U.S. bombing threat, although giving no short-term relief to the people dying and millions of desperate refugees fleeing the Syrian slaughter, has helped open a political channel between the United States and Iran.

This development is potentially a breakthrough in more than three decades of U.S.-Iranian enmity that has become, perhaps, the biggest single threat of a catastrophic regional war. It's no wonder that this opening angers the hawks and militarist Zionists (not only neoconservatives) in U.S. politics and the Netanyahu government in Israel, the Saudi monarchy that prizes its own oil-fueled special relationship with U.S. imperialism, and for that matter some hardcore clerical and Revolutionary Guard elements in Iran's factional whirlpool. (Saudi Arabia is also the main supporter and financier of Egypt's current military regime.)

The sound and fury of the longstanding U.S.-Iran conflict is all about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program, but the underlying issue is Iran's conventional military strength, and its expanding regional influence over the past decade. That's what upsets Israel's political and military elites who demand nothing less than overwhelming Israeli strategic superiority over all other regional states combined. The United States of course is the longstanding guarantor of this formula for so-called "regional stability."

### **The Decline of U.S. Power**

This arrangement is now colliding with a decline in U.S. power over the politics of the Middle East. The overwhelming U.S. supremacy following the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitably impermanent, but its decline was dramatically accelerated by George W. Bush's catastrophic war in Iraq and the lunatic project of "transforming the Middle East" into a lake of loyal U.S. clients. It was Iran that "won" America's imperial adventure in Iraq.

In today's "new Middle East" with its cauldron of Arab upheavals and the likelihood of longterm revolutionary processes, the United States cannot dictate terms unilaterally. The spectacle of the government shutdown and default brinkmanship in Washington doesn't exactly enhance its prestige either.

A U.S.-Russian-Iranian bargain to end the Washington-Iran confrontation might possibly even deliver some external "settlement" to Syria, however unsatisfactory such a deal may be to its people's desire for freedom. Whatever such a bargain might turn out to be, it won't be on the terms of Israeli demands for abject Iranian surrender. This explains Netanyahu's visible anger over president Obama's overtures to the new Iranian president Rouhani.

Netanyahu's U.S. friends in the Israel Lobby are an unholy three-headed alliance of major Jewish leaders and neocons warning of doomsday, the Christian fundamentalist Armageddon-mongers praying for it, and the military-industrial complex laboring 24/7 to make it profitable. These forces, along with the Saudi monarchy, do not want tensions with Iran to relax. On the contrary, they want stronger sanctions to strangle Iran's economy to the point, they hope, where a desperate Iranian regime might actually make a push for nuclear weapons capability — giving a pretext for a U.S.-Israeli military strike, which they know full well Israel cannot carry out alone.

A rogue Israeli war with Iran is not a prospect that the Obama administration, or any sane U.S. government, will entertain. So long as a shooting war with Iran contradicts vital U.S. imperial interests, Washington will impose a veto on a less than fully sane Israeli effort to provoke one. On the other hand, when strategic interests are not at stake, U.S. allies are free to run amok in their own front or back yards even when their behavior embarrasses and discredits the American president.

Hence Israel builds new colonial-apartheid settlements, making negotiations with the Palestinian Authority meaningless even as the comical John Kerry promotes "the revival of the peace process."

The Egyptian military solidifies its dictatorship and murderous repression even while Obama pleads for a “democratic transition.” The Bahraini royal house calls in Saudi troops to crush protests right in front of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, which of course is based there in order to bring “democratic values” to the Middle East.

In president Obama’s speech urging Congress to vote for war, or maybe not, at least not right away, and later in his address to the UN General Assembly, he cleared up any apparent ambiguities in the U.S. position. We are an exceptional and indispensable nation, motivated by the highest standards and human rights principles, which will go to any necessary lengths to ensure U.S. access to the oil we need to keep the world safe and free. What could be clearer than that?

## **Middle East in Revolution**

Great-power rhetoric and imperial maneuvering aren’t the only games in town, even if it sometimes seems that way. Against all odds, people in the Middle East continue their struggles for the dignity, democracy and decent lives that are theirs by right, and by virtue of the sacrifices they have made. For us, it’s these struggles more than anything else that will make or break the future of the region, and where we must focus our attention.

In Egypt, the democratic political revolution has been hijacked by the military-bureaucratic-capitalist “deep state” — twice. When the January-February 2011 uprising toppled the Mubarak regime, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces proclaimed itself the savior of the nation, set up a hasty constitutional and electoral process, and formed a partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood to rule Egypt under a rammed-through Islamist constitution.

When millions rose up in July 2012 against the repressive, arrogant and incompetent MB government of Mohammed Morsi, the military intervened again, deposing the president with mass arrests and large-scale killings of the ensuing resistance — not to bring democracy but to again entrench the military’s power under the Bonapartist general al-Sisi.

These successive regimes, Mubarak, Morsi and the neo-Mubarak general al-Sisi, have something important in common: neoliberal economic “adjustment” policies that push more and more Egyptians into deeper poverty, thus ensuring that the social upheaval will continue. In the field of economic policy, the same is true of the regime in Syria, which is why Bashar al-Assad’s government was hailed as a pro-western moderate force right up until the popular uprising triggered by its kidnapping and torture of children. It’s also the case in Sudan, where the removal of fuel subsidies has now led to street protests which are met with murderous violence by the regime of Omar al-Bashir.

There will be no easy victories for the popular movements, as came to be expected in the euphoric early days of the Arab Spring. Liberation will not come from benevolent military elites, or from U.S. Cruise missiles. The notion that entrenched family dynasties and kleptocracies would fold up in the face of nonviolent civil protest alone was at best a well-intentioned western delusion. The hard fact is that armed struggle — not as a surrogate for mass popular and workers’ movements, but as a component of them — becomes necessary and inevitable in the course of confronting entrenched state power.

Elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*, we explore some of the dynamics of the Arab world’s revolutions and possible consequences of a U.S. military intervention in Syria, which had appeared imminent. We will continue to cover the unfolding events in future issues, but some brief observations are relevant here.

The Arab world upheavals arose after decades of what seemed to be a “permanent counterrevolution” in the region. Nationalist regimes in the 1950s and ‘60s (Egypt, Syria, South Yemen, Algeria) could not fulfill their promises of development. Illusions of pan-Arabism, under the banner of this or that self-styled savior, collapsed. National liberation movements weakened under the pressures of imperialism and reactionary regimes financed by oil monarchies, and even further with the decline and collapse of the Soviet bloc in which they had placed too many hopes. Israel, of course, waged an unceasing drive to crush every expression of the Palestinian people’s desire for self-determination.

The defeats of Arab nationalism and the left, combined with policies of “structural adjustment” imposed by western financial institutions, left the field clear for the rise of that toxic phenomenon called “Islamic fundamentalism.” Appearing as a kind of anti-colonial resistance, filling a vacuum left by the failures of progressive resistance movements, this anti-woman, anti-modern, anti-cultural and anti-scientific force has ironically spread its poison into societies where Islam was not traditionally intolerant or monolithic — from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Somalia, Mali and Nigeria.

Imperialism and the United States in particular forged deadly alliances of convenience with some of the worst of these elements — most notably in Afghanistan and Pakistan — under the banner of anti-communism. But now that these viciously reactionary forces have themselves become a menace to western powers, the international left must never see them as allies in the guise of a superficial and illusory “anti-imperialism.”

Neither in Syria, or Egypt, or Palestine or anywhere else does a decisive democratic breakthrough appear imminent. But the clock won’t turn back to the days before the Tunisian and Egyptian masses launched the Arab Spring. If the notion of a quick and mostly pain-free road to a progressive and democratic future was utopian, the long hard struggle for that future is all the more inevitable and urgent.

Supporters of that struggle in the international left must begin with anti-imperialism — no bombing of Syria, or anyplace else! — but that’s only the beginning. We have to stand with those who are to liberate themselves and their countries. Most important perhaps, we need to learn about and build solidarity with the workers’ movements that can ultimately break the combined stranglehold of neoliberalism, dictatorship and fundamentalism. No easy victories, but no surrender.

**The Editors**, *Against the Current*

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