

Is there a 'US war on Syria'? The Syrian uprising, the Assad regime, the US and Israel

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May 11, 2013 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — In the wake of two Israeli airstrikes on targets in Syria on the June 4-5 weekend, the second causing massive explosions close to Damascus and killing at least several dozen Syrian troops, discussion rages about the aims of this aggression and the relationship it has to the ongoing mass uprising and civil war in Syria.

Israel claimed both attacks were aimed at Iranian long-range rockets, or the military depots where they were housed, that were in transit via Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As the Zionist regime has continually indicated that its "red line" was the transfer of any significant "game-changing" weaponry to either Hezbollah in Lebanon (which is currently aligned to Syria's besieged Assad regime) or to the Sunni Islamist rebels fighting to overthrow that regime, this explanation seems plausible.

In fact, Israel also bombed a convoy of rockets in western Syria destined for Hezbollah at the end of January, and according to some reports, also a biological weapons research centre near Damascus, which "was reportedly flattened out of concern that it might fall into the hands of Islamist extremists fighting to topple the government of Syrian president Bashar Assad", according to Aaron Klein and Karl Vick writing in *Time magazine* [[1](#)].

Indeed, after the latest bombings, Israel's leaders went on to stress that these attacks were not aimed at the Assad regime, still less to support the armed opposition, as will be discussed further below.

But of course such aggression must also be seen in a wider context. Clearly the situation in Syria is falling apart and the war daily is getting more vicious and criminal (on both sides, but above all on the side of the regime), without any end in sight. Clearly at some point there may well be some form of more direct imperialist intervention than at present, even if only to try to stamp its mark, in whatever way possible, on an almost impossible situation. The myths about "recent gains by the Syrian regime" is just bravado to talk up the latest rounds of horrific massacres in the north coastal region, which promise no more stability than the last two years of brutal massacres.

Mass terror

Therefore, in such a context, with Israel everyday lamenting the “lost peace” on the northern border of occupied Golan (i.e., the peace it has enjoyed for 40 years as the Assad regime never challenged the Zionist occupation and annexation of its Golan territory), Israel is also announcing loud and clear to all sides in Syria, and to the Syrian masses, that “Israel is here, and this is what we can do”. The overall aim, in other words, is mass terror.

Yet while the situation may inexorably drive towards some kind of imperialist intervention, the outstanding fact to date has been the reluctance of imperialist states – and above all Israel – to lend any concrete support (or in Israel’s case, even verbal support) to the opposition trying to overthrow Assad’s tyrannical capitalist dictatorship.

And while a simple comparison with the extremely rapid intervention in Libya (within a few weeks of the beginning of the uprising in early 2011) might ignore practical differences for intervention in the two cases, any analysis of statements and actions of the US and especially Israel over these two years make clear that both have fundamental political objections to the nature of the opposition. These even extend to prospect of the overthrow of the regime itself, unless it can occur under a very strong degree of imperialist control, which is a very unlikely prospect.

No secular fighters?

It’s worth looking at a recent article in the *New York Times* which, like a great many articles, over-emphasise the significance of the radical Islamist element in the armed uprising. In this case, the *NYT* made the case more absolute [2]:

“Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of”.

Curiously, for a number of those on the left convinced that the US is hell bent on backing the Syrian rebellion against the regime of Bashar Assad, or who even claim the US is explicitly backing these “Islamist” forces within it, or even that the whole Syrian rebellion is a “US war on Syria”, this statement was greeted as a sign that “even the US” is coming to understand how bad the rebels “that it supports” are.

This is a very odd argument for a number of reasons. But before analysing the reasons for the *NYT*’s statement, it is worth looking at the evidence. It is certainly true that there is a strong “Islamist” element within the armed opposition, and that as Assad’s brutality grows, so does the “radical” nature of the ideology of many of the rebel groups, and also the reverse brutality of some of the armed rebels (whether secular or Islamist). It is also true that part of the Islamist opposition is backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar as part of a reactionary-sectarian regional game (see below). And it is further true that some Islamist groups, such as Al-Nusra, are allegedly linked to Al-Qaeda.

However, there are also a vast number of articles, interviews, documents, photos, videos and other evidence of opposition, both armed and unarmed, and opposition-controlled towns, that remain secular, or at least religious only in a formal sense without any “sharia law”, or that are opposed to the Islamicisation of the movement. While this article is not aimed at proving this, here are some useful links that demonstrate the point:

“The Syrian revolution has changed me as a writer”,
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/may/03/samar-yazbek-syrian-revolution-writing?CMP=tw_t_gu.

“Welcome to Free Syria Meeting the rebel government of an embattled country”,
<http://harpers.org/archive/2012/08/welcome-to-free-syria/>.

“How should Idlib’s Islamists be handled?”,
<http://syriasurvey.blogspot.com.au/2012/12/what-to-do-with-idlibs-islamists.html>.

“Syrian rebels tackle local government”,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-rebels-tackle-local-government/2013/04/30/3f2181d8-b1b9-11e2-baf7-5bc2a9dc6f44_story.html.

“Syria: the ‘no secular fighters’ myth”,
<http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2013/4/30/syria-audio-analysis-the-no-secular-fighters-myth-scott-luca.html>.

“Jihadists and secular activists clash in Syria”,
www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/world/.../syria-war-developments.html.

“Some rebels worry about extremists but Assad comes first”,
http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/some_rebels_worry_about_extremists_but_assad_comes_first_20120822/.

“Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals”,
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Aug-08/183858-syria-rebels-see-future-fight-with-foreign-radicals.ashx#axzz22zO6OH7J>.

“First Christian unit of FSA forms”,
<http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=2528>.

“The battle to name Syria’s Friday protests”,
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/04/201241314026709762.html>.

A similar list could of course be made of all kinds of brutal, reactionary and religious-sectarian actions by parts of the anti-Assad revolt. But that is not what is in question in such a variegated, bottom-up, mass uprising. The evidence above makes clear that the sectarian element can by no means be declared in complete control.

‘US war on Syria’ ... means what exactly?

So, given the evidence, why did the *NYT* make this ridiculous, sweeping, clearly false statement? An obvious explanation might be precisely that the *NYT*, which tends to closely reflect US ruling-class thinking, is simply pushing this line precisely in order to justify US policy, consistently over the last two years, of not supporting the Syrian uprising.

Overwhelmingly, the reason continually being stressed by the US government for its lack of support to the rebels is its hostility to the growing “Islamist” part of the rebellion, especially, but not only, the Al-Nusra organisation, which the US has officially listed as a “terrorist organisation”. The Islamist forces are generally hostile to US imperialism, and very hostile to Israel, which has even in stronger terms expressed its opposition to these forces coming anywhere near power in Syria (see below). The CIA has even made contingency plans for drone strikes on the radical Islamist rebels [3].

The idea that the US wants to support these Islamists, and is just pretending not to, is a fantasy indulged in by parts of the left who have decided to throw their lot in with the reactionary

dictatorship of Assad. Since the Islamists are doing a significant amount of the fighting, and the extreme fringe of Islamists (e.g. al-Nusra) have taken responsibility for the actions that can most correctly be called “war like” (e.g., terrorist bombings in Damascus etc.), the best way to claim the uprising is a “US war on Syria” is to make the inherently unlikely claim that the US is supporting and arming these Islamists, despite the US and other imperialist governments stressing nearly every day that these Islamists are the primary reason they are not supporting and arming the uprising.

Just to clarify: this claim by the US and Israel that they are hostile to the Islamist element in the uprising, especially the more radical elements, is not simply rhetoric; it is clearly true. However, both the US and Israel are relentlessly hostile to the democratic element of the Syrian uprising as well. A genuine people’s revolution would challenge the reactionary US-backed dictatorships in the region, and would be much more likely than Assad’s pliant dictatorship to challenge Israel’s 46-year occupation of its Golan territory. But it is not smart politics to say the latter very loudly. So by pretending the entire anti-Assad movement is Islamic fundamentalist, the US has sought to justify not giving concrete support to any element of the uprising.

Oh, but the US is sending arms to the Syrian rebellion, isn’t it? But simply making that statement for years does not prove that it’s true. A CBS report on May 1 noted, *“The first shipment of U.S. aid to the armed Syrian rebels was being delivered Tuesday to the opposition Supreme Military Council (SMC). It includes \$8 million in medical supplies and ready-to-eat military food rations”* [4]. You read it right. After nearly two and a half years of the Syrian uprising, about two thirds of that time in the form of armed rebellion, the first US shipment of aid to the rebels occurred in May 2013 in the form of “medical equipment and food rations”.

In reality, what we see most of the time is the US expressing extreme reservations about any kind of intervention in the Syrian civil war, not just about the outlandish suggestions by Republican Party hawks like John McCain for air strikes, but even for arming the armed opposition. In February, the US did authorise a US\$60 million package for “non-lethal aid” for the SMC, once it had decided that the SMC leadership could be controlled and could control the flow of whatever equipment it got. Of that \$60 million, it is only this \$8 million in food and medicines that has yet seen the light of day.

More recently, hints were made that the package could include things like body armour and night-vision goggles. On May 1, the *Washington Post* reported anonymous US officials saying, “they are moving toward the shipment of arms” beginning at some unspecified time in the next few months, “but emphasized that they are still pursuing political negotiation”, with US President Barack Obama pursuing further talks with Russia to try to find agreement [5].

These talks with Russia have now begun, with US state secretary John Kerry visiting Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to try to hold an international conference, attended by both members of the Assad regime and the opposition, aiming to set up a “transition” government in Syria which would include both some Assad regime ministers and opposition figures, thus keeping the core of the regime intact [6]. The role of Assad himself appears to be a key sticking point.

Indeed, with all the hoo-ha about the Syrian military allegedly using chemical weapons, and leftist claims that this was the parallel of the “WMD” excuse to invade Iraq, one might have expected the US to take advantage of this to order some kind of aggressive action. In reality, Obama’s reaction was to re-define his “red line” he had made of any use of chemical weapons to mean any “systematic use”, which no one claims to have occurred [7].

In sharp contrast to the emphatic lies about Iraqi WMD peddled in order to justify an invasion, in this case Obama has reacted to allegations of use of chemical weapons by stressing the evidence “was still preliminary” [8] and thus he was in no rush to intervene, stressing he needs to “make sure

I've got the facts... If we end up rushing to judgment without hard, effective evidence, we can find ourselves in a position where we can't mobilize the international community to support".

Therefore, most analysis suggests the US is very unlikely to sharply change course. US defence secretary Chuck Hagel stressed that "no international or regional consensus on supporting armed intervention now exists", while "NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen has ruled out Western military intervention and U.S. Admiral James Stavridis, NATO's supreme allied commander, cautioned last month that the alliance would need agreement in the region and among NATO members as well as a U.N. Security Council resolution" (ibid).

Likewise, the until-now more hawkish British government is now "exercising more caution [9] in its attempts to arm the rebels fighting the Bashar Assad regime in Syria, following intelligence reports and warnings by other governments that the major part of the rebel movement has been taken over by Jihadist groups with links to Al-Qaida", and the recently hawkish French government has in the last week swung strongly towards advocating a political solution. Germany for its part has remained steadfastly opposed to recent Anglo-French attempts to end the European Union arms embargo on the Syrian rebels [10].

There are of course the much more hawkish calls from Republicans such as John McCain and Lindsay Graham for US air strikes on Syria's chemical weapons sites. Notably, McCain was not concerned about whether Assad's forces had used chemical weapons or not - even if they hadn't, he said the US should still "use Patriot [missile] batteries and cruise missiles" and ready an "international force" to enter Syria to secure stocks of chemical weapons.

Clearly enough, these are more aggressive imperialists even than Obama. Yet still not that useful for Assad fans as an argument - McCain's reason for this is that "these chemical weapons ... cannot fall into the hands of the jihadists" [11].

Others also pushing hard to arm a vetted section of the rebel leadership also do so mainly to counter the growing strength of the radical Islamist forces. For example, on May 7, top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker, claimed the US will "shortly" start arming some "moderate" rebels to boost them over the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra front [12]. He said the "moderate opposition groups that we support are not as good at fighting, they're not as good as delivering humanitarian aid, and we need to change the balance" because "*a nightmare would be al-Nusra, if you will, gaining control of Syria. That's worse than Assad being there*".

Notably, legislation introduced the previous day by Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Bob Menendez to "greenlight the flow of arms" from the US to rebel groups "that have gone through a thorough vetting process" would not include the transfer of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles (ibid), i.e., the arms that rebels would need to even come close to dealing with Assad's massive air power. In other words, the bill mainly deals with small weapons that the US can use for leverage over the rebels and with Assad, rather than being of any effective concrete assistance.

Thus while two years of fighting the Assad regime did not qualify the Free Syrian Army to receive US or EU arms, now that radical Islamist forces appear to be getting an upper hand in the anti-Assad rebellion, they may qualify in order to fight the Islamists. The imperialist dilemma is that by the US refusing to send arms, and the EU imposing an arms embargo (which favours the massively armed Assad regime, which in any case gets loads of arms from Russia and Iran), more and more anti-Assad rebels will turn to the Islamists [13], as they receive arms from Saudi Arabia and Qatar and regional Islamist networks. The argument is that arms need to be sent to non-Islamist fighters to balance those received by the Islamists; the counter-arguments is that many of the arms may end up with the Islamists anyway.

In any case, the US is only dealing with exile rebel leaderships in Jordan and Turkey, such as the unrepresentative Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Supreme Military Command, the high command of the Free Syrian Army (SFA), which liaises with the SNC. They have minimal control over what the locally organised FSA and the Local Coordinating Committees do all over Syria, and it is precisely this lack of control over the largely self-organised revolutionary ranks – not only for Islamists – that makes the imperialist powers so hesitant to arm anyone.

While much was made of 200 US troops being sent to Jordan to help coordinate aid to the rebel leadership, it was astounding that the leadership was unable to get any arms to the FSA in southern Syria, near the Jordanian border, when it just lost the strategic town of Khirbet Ghazaleh [14]. A very strange “US war on Syria”.

Aside from arming the rebels, other “possible military choices range from limited one-off missile strikes from ships ... to bolder operations like carving out no-fly safe zones” [15], or the creation of “humanitarian safe areas that would also be no-fly zones off limits to the Syrian air force”. However, US officials have warned that “once you set up a military no-fly zone or safe zone, you’re on a slippery slope, mission creep and before you know it, you have boots on the ground”, said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst and Middle East expert at the Brookings Institution (ibid).

Of course, despite all this there may well come a time when the US decides that the level of ongoing instability is simply too great to be allowed to continue, or that its so-called “credibility” is at stake if it doesn’t do something, or that if it is all going to fall apart anyway, so the US needs to choose those who it wants to take over, despite the difficulties of enforcing such a choice. Imperialism cannot be trusted to act “rationally”, even from its own point of view, at all times, and a catastrophic – for all involved – US intervention cannot be ruled out.

Nevertheless, if the kind of action that people like McCain are urging came to pass, that would be a *marked shift* – to claim it gave credence to the idea that the last two years of uprising and rebellion was all a “US war on Syria” would be too illogical to warrant comment.

Saudi-Qatari intervention: promoting sectarian counterrevolution

Many of the assertions about US aid to the Syrian uprising, when examined for evidence, are nothing but reiterations of the well-known fact that the reactionary Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have been providing a moderate stream of arms for specific rebel groups. The fact that these two states are pro-US is twisted in discussion to mean they are mere puppets of the US, as if they cannot have their own policies.

In fact, these two relatively powerful states are engaged in an aggressive regional “sub-imperialist” project, with the dual aims of countering Iranian influence in the region, and turning the democratic impulse of the Arab Spring, including its Syrian chapter, into a Sunni-Shia sectarian war. The democratic impulse was and is a mortal danger to the absolute monarchies just as much as to regimes like that of Assad, as Saudi Arabia’s suppression of the uprising in Bahrain shows. Saudi and Qatari intervention is thus a counterrevolution trying to hijack a revolution.

However, while the US may also see some benefit in diverting a democratic movement in a sectarian direction up to a point, it is very wary of this strategy, principally because the only available “shock troops” for this Saudi strategy are hard-line Sunni Islamists and “jihadists” who are more anti-US and especially anti-Israel than Iran itself, and much more so than the Assad regime, which does not have an “anti-imperialist” history at all.

Just to make things clear: just because these Saudi-backed forces are “anti-imperialist” and imperialism and Israel are hostile to them, does not make them “good”. To suggest that would be falling into the same trap as those who wrongly think Assad is “anti-imperialist” and that this makes his regime “good”. The Saudi-backed forces are the most reactionary in the Syrian context, especially given the sectarian dimension, and the reactionary strategy of the US (see below) would even be slightly better than an outright jihadist victory – except that such an outright jihadist victory is almost impossible, as there remains a real democratic anti-Assad movement on the ground that is hostile to the jihadists.

Israel: ‘Terrorists’ the main enemy

The strangeness of the argument that the US “must” be behind the anti-Assad rebellion if some of its Arab allies are behind parts of it, is that the key US ally in the region, Israel, remains steadfastly opposed to this Saudi-led project, viewing a victory of a Syrian uprising with a strong Islamist component as a nightmare. While Israel wants to weaken the Assad regime in order to disrupt the passage of arms between Iran and Hezbollah via Syria, it is also aware that the Assad regime has both kept the border with the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan completely quiet for 40 years, and that the same regime has continually waged war on the Palestinians [16].

Therefore, Israel’s stand has been the polar opposite of the Saudi-Qatari stand.

That is not to say Israel won’t launch aggression – as it has clearly just done – but that such aggression, for its own reasons, is not aimed at helping the Syrian opposition overthrow Assad. Straight after the bombing of military facilities near Damascus on May 5, Israel sought to persuade Assad that the air strikes “did not aim to weaken him in the face of a more than two-year-old rebellion... Officials say Israel is reluctant to take sides in Syria’s civil war for fear its actions would boost Islamists who are even more hostile to Israel than the Assad family, which has maintained a stable stand off with the Jewish state for decades”. According to veteran Israeli politician Tzachi Hanegbi, a confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the government “aimed to avoid an increase in tension with Syria by making clear that if there is activity, it is only against Hezbollah, not against the Syrian regime” [17].

In a similar vein, defence ministry strategist Amos Gilad stressed that while “Israel has long made clear it is prepared to resort to force to prevent advanced Syrian weapons reaching Hezbollah or jihadi rebels”, Israel was not interested in attacking Syria’s chemical weapons because “the good news is that this is under full control (of the Syrian government)” [18].

Israel’s overall stance was explained recently by Yuval Steinitz, Israel’s minister of intelligence and strategic affairs, who stressed the “only scenario” for Israeli military action in Syria would be to “prevent the delivering of arms, chemical weapons and other kinds of weapons into the hands of terrorists” [19]. He noted that Netanyahu had made clear that “if there will be no threat to Israel, we won’t interfere”. Steinitz emphasised that Israel was not urging the US to take any military action “whatsoever” in Syria at this stage”.

In an interview with BBC TV, Netanyahu called the Syrian rebel groups among “the worst Islamist radicals in the world [20] ... So obviously we are concerned that weapons that are ground-breaking, that can change the balance of power in the Middle East, would fall into the hands of these terrorists”, he said. In a recent meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron, Netanyahu, who was visiting London for Margaret Thatcher’s funeral, again warned of the danger of Western arms reaching jihadist rebels that could be used later against Israel and Western targets [21].

In particular, Israel “worries that whoever comes out on top in the civil war will be a much more dangerous adversary” than Assad has ever been, specifically in relation to the Golan Heights. “The military predicts all that (the 40-year peaceful border) will soon change as it prepares for the worst” [22].

According to Israel’s Lieutenant-General Benny Gantz in March [23], “we see terror organisations that are increasingly gaining footholds in the territory and they are fighting against Assad. Guess what? We’ll be next in line”, while Major General Aviv Kochavi, warning that “radical Islam” was gaining ground in Syria, compared the region near the Golan with “the situation in Sinai, as a result of growing jihad movement in Syria” [24].

Clarifying that it is the fall of Assad that worries Israel, Aluf Benn wrote in *Haaretz* that “the worrisome scenario in the north is that *after Assad is gone Israel will be attacked*, and the Syrian Golan will turn into a new version of the Gaza Strip, with southern Lebanon serving as a base for launching rockets and missiles. This is what is concerning the IDF’s top brass. Assad’s control of the Golan is disintegrating as his forces are being drawn into the decisive battles around Damascus and the fight for the city’s international airport” [25].

Thus while Hezbollah is seen as a mortal enemy, the anti-Assad Islamist fighters are seen as in some ways even less predictable. According to Aaron Klein and Karl Vick writing in *Time* in February, “Hizballah is not Israel’s only concern – or perhaps even the most worrying. Details of the Israeli strikes make clear the risk posed by fundamentalist militants sprinkled among the variegated rebel forces fighting to depose Assad ... jihadist groups are less vulnerable to the same levers that have proved effective against Syria and other states – such as threats to its territory – or even the frank interests of an organization like Hizballah, which as a political party plays a major role in Lebanon’s government” [26].

Of course, outside the actual contest between Assad and opposition, Israel’s bigger project is to build up for an attack on Iran. In this sense, the bombings can also be seen as a warning to Iran, and even a test run. As Assad has been both asset and thorn for Israel, it prefers his regime to remain, if weakened, and to try to either attack Iran, or decimate Hezbollah, as its way of breaking the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Shia nexus. In contrast, the governments doing the most to intervene against Assad’s regime – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – are all horrified at the prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran, as it would tend to swing their own populations into “Islamic solidarity” with Iran [27]. They prefer to try to break the nexus via destroying Assad and bringing to power a Sunni Islamist regime in Damascus – Israel’s nightmare.

The only reason Syria is in the “nexus” in the first place is due to Israel’s illegal annexation of the Golan. Syria uses Hezbollah as a form of indirect pressure via Lebanon, while keeping its own Israeli Golan border quiet. With its bombing and Israel’s frank words afterwards, Israel is also sending a message to Assad that if he wants Israel’s help, he has to break the nexus with Hezbollah. Naturally, Assad has no reason to trust the Zionist regime, and still less as Israel is not offering the return of the Golan in exchange. With Syria weakened, Israel has the bargaining power.

A final thought on Israel’s intentions is that, given the fears expressed about south Syria becoming a “new Gaza” if Assad falls, some Israeli strategists may even be considering invading to set up a new “buffer zone” between its occupied Golan and victorious Islamists and/or Hezbollah infiltration into the region. Thus current aggression may be a prelude to a larger operation, if the Zionist regime sees it as necessary and feasible, but this would be a very high-risk move.

Let 'terrorists' kill each other?

One interesting angle to all this, however, is that as both the US and Israel view both Hezbollah and the anti-Assad Sunni jihadis as enemies, would it not be in their interests for them to kill each other in Syria? While Israel opposes weapons getting to Hezbollah in Lebanon, it may look differently at Hezbollah foolishly wasting its resources, energies and cadres in Syria fighting other Islamists, and focused away from Israel. This strategy was advocated by neo-con extremist Daniel Pipes [28], who asserted that "continued fighting does less damage to Western interests than their taking power. There are worse prospects than Sunni and Shiite Islamists mixing it up, than Hamas jihadis killing Hezbollah jihadis, and vice versa... This keeps them focused locally, and it prevents either one from emerging victorious and thereby posing a greater danger. Western powers should guide enemies to a stalemate by helping whichever side is losing, so as to prolong their conflict". As he believes Assad is currently losing, the US should support Assad.

The snag in that would be, of course, if Assad falls, Hezbollah would be in a similar position inside Syria to the Sunni Islamists in being able to grab access to Assad's weaponry. All the more reason, from Israel's point of view, for the regime to survive as the "least worst scenario". They also cannot necessarily be relied on to keep fighting once Assad is gone; jointly turning their attention to liberating Golan is not out of the question. And the strategy also means the continuation of massive instability in Syria for the foreseeable future, precisely what most imperialist interests see as the problem.

Heading where?

The Assad regime, in its current form at least, is finished, if not now, then soon; it has at least a majority of its population fighting it, and even if it can hang on, it can never defeat the opposition. As long as the regime hangs on, the region will be in a state of permanent instability, wracked by massive war and terrible bloodshed. The figure of 70,000 killed to date may end up being dwarfed. Those interpreting the US verbal support for the regime's replacement as some fundamental hostility are simply refusing to see that the US now wants Assad out because he cannot win and his presence guarantees continued instability, as well as the further rise of the radical Islamist element. But what does it want to replace the regime with?

The US interest is to balance between the mutually hostile Israeli and Saudi projects for the region, while at all cost trying to preserve some sense of "order" in the (inevitable) Syrian transition. The US therefore prefers a deal that would include significant parts of Assad's regime, to preserve a "stable" core, joined with some defector generals from the regime, "liberal" oppositionists in the foreign-based Syrian National Council (which is unrepresentative of the Syrian movement on the ground) and more moderate members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This strategy is at variance with the Saudi strategy, and aimed at both stemming the reactionary Islamist tide, but also ensuring no genuine "people's power" can arise from below.

The current US attempt to find a "negotiated solution" together with Moscow fits this strategy; Kerry was not wrong when he said that the US and Russia have similar interests in Syria.

While the Syrian opposition has not rejected this course, it has reacted coolly. Moaz al-Khatib, the recently resigned head of the opposition umbrella National Opposition Coalition (NOC), warned Syrians to "be careful of squandering your revolution in international conference halls". Its "red line" would be any role for Assad himself in any "transitional government", which would inevitably involve some members of his regime.

This is an understandable and valid reaction to any attempt by powerful outside states to derail the people's will.

Cease-fire

However, the growing role of a reactionary-Sunni sectarian element among the armed opposition, backed by the tyrannies of the Gulf, and the fact that this sectarianism frightens the bulk of the minority populations, at least Alawis and Christians and probably some Druze and even secular Sunni, into grudgingly backing the regime or remaining neutral, and the fact that endless war with no victory of either side in sight is simply catastrophic to all, means that a "military victory" over Assad is highly unlikely. Also, any "military solution" in the current sectarian circumstances may be anything but the most democratic outcome.

Military struggle is by no means synonymous with Islamist or sectarian politics as is often thought; at the outset, the masses picked up arms to defend themselves from Assad's slaughter, and a good part of the Free Syrian Army is still simply the armed people. But armed struggle, due to the very nature of bloodshed, in particular without a left-wing and consciously anti-sectarian leadership, can help bolster an existing sectarian potential. A ceasefire would arguably create the best conditions for the democratic element of the mass movement to gain some breathing space and revive the mass struggle.

Whether or not the current US-Russia talks can bring a ceasefire about is uncertain, but even if they can, whether or not such a cease-fire and transitional government can really give any breathing space to the masses also depends a great deal on whether such an unbroken "Assad state without Assad" allows such a breathing space, or simply continues its repression and terror with a new face.

Arms

In the meantime, it is important to stress that it is the regime that is imposing a "military solution" on a massive scale; in such circumstances the FSA has the right to get arms for self-defence from whoever it wants. Blaming whatever tiny trickle of arms the FSA gets for continuing military conflict is simply stating that the FSA should commit suicide in order to achieve the peace of the graveyard. To begin to ever-so-slightly equalising the fire power of the two sides - with the regime still absolutely dominant [29] - does not mean advocating a military solution. It just means people have the right to protect themselves against getting blasted to bits. It may even strengthen the possibilities for a negotiated solution, which at present Assad has no reason to consider.

If on the other hand the current talks break down, and the US and other imperialist powers, or even Israel, decide to desperately throw themselves in, and the McCain strategy comes to pass, the current situation would become even more catastrophic. While it is clearly not the Israeli strategy - yet another case where extremely pro-Zionist US neo-conservatives are not aligned with Israel's strategy - Israel would likely move to take advantage of such a conflagration to carry out its own aggression against Iran, or even to forcibly expel a new wave of Palestinians.

Opposing imperialism should obviously not mean being apologists for Assad's butchery. But it is important to remember that opposing this butchery should in no circumstances mean losing our critical faculties and forgetting the kind of armageddon a real imperialist war would entail.

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P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3344>

Footnotes

- [1] <http://world.time.com/2013/02/01/the-fallout-from-the-air-raid-on-syria-why-israel-is-concerned/>
- [2] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/world/middleeast/islamist-rebels-gains-in-syria-create-dilemma-for-us.html?pagewanted=all&_r=3&
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- [4] [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505263_162-57582025/syrian-rebels-to-get-1st-direct-u.s-support-as-\\$8m-in-medical-supplies-rations-set-for-delivery/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505263_162-57582025/syrian-rebels-to-get-1st-direct-u.s-support-as-$8m-in-medical-supplies-rations-set-for-delivery/)
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- [7] <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2013/04/syria-red-line>
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- [9] <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/britain-less-eager-to-arm-syrian-rebels-following-intel-on-al-qaida-links.premium-1.518235>
- [10] <http://www.timesofisrael.com/german-fm-stands-by-refusal-to-send-arms-to-syria/>
- [11] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/article11595592.ece>
- [12] <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/u-shortly-arming-syrian-rebels-key-senator-132440647.html>
- [13] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>
- [14] <http://news.yahoo.com/assads-forces-capture-strategic-town-southern-syria-034605544.html>
- [15] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/27/us-usa-syria-military-options-idUSBRE93Q0C620130427>

[16] for more detail, see links.org.au/node/2766

[17] <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-06/216124-israel-to-assad-air-strike-s-did-not-aim-to-help-syria-rebels.ashx#axzz2SV4D8Zkd>

[18] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/04/us-syria-crisis-chemical-israel-idUSBRE94309720130504>

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[25] <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/despite-netanyahu-s-weekly-warnings-on-iran-syria-is-more-imminent-danger.premium-1.515547>

[26] <http://world.time.com/2013/02/01/the-fallout-from-the-air-raid-on-syria-why-israel-is-concerned/>

[27] some evidence of this at links.org.au/node/2991

[28] <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/11/pipes-argument-assad/>

[29] To discuss this would require another article, however, a good look at Syria's massive military equipment is at <http://www.revolutionobserver.com/2012/11/syrias-military-capability.html#!/2012/11/syrias-military-capability.html>. It is beyond ridiculous to talk about a few small arms getting to the FSA coming anywhere near this massive array of tanks, APCs, attack helicopters, combat planes, scud and other missiles etc.