

Issues in the current stage of Syrian revolution

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Contents

- [The Syrian revolution continue](#)
- [Dangers to the Syrian revoluti](#)
- [Saudi-Qatari adventure hits](#)
- [Why the US and EU have not](#)
- [Massive quantities of arms to](#)
- [CIA coordination of weapons](#)
- [US wants to use FSA to strike](#)
- [Imperialist-orchestrated \(...\)](#)
- [Attitude to Syrian rebels](#)
- [But what if ...?](#)

July 9, 2013 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Recent weeks saw seemingly contradictory developments regarding imperialist plans for Syria. First, on June 14, the US government announced it had finally agreed to provide some small arms directly to “vetted” sections of the Syrian armed opposition, following alleged US “confirmation” that Syria’s Assad regime had used chemical weapons. Then on June 18, the G8 meeting between the US, Russia and six other major imperialist powers issued a joint declaration calling for all parties to the Syrian conflict to attend the Geneva peace summit, declaring the need for a political solution.

In reality, the combination of these two developments was almost identical to what likewise occurred in the same week in early May: lots of hard talk about the possible provision of arms to the rebels due to the possible use of chemicals by the Syrian regime of Bashir Assad, and the initial US-Russian meeting to discuss Geneva and lots of talk about how both sides agree only a political solution is possible.

It may take some time to be able to properly assess the full implications of these moves. At the outset, however, two points can be stressed.

The first is that while the direct provision of an as yet unspecified amount of US arms to the Syrian rebels allows increased US leverage with both the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime, no serious commentators are suggesting this will make a great deal of difference on the ground. The US is only pledging to provide light weapons and ammunition, which are already being supplied by countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While this may add to the volume of such weapons, or even allow the Gulf states to provide certain kinds of US weapons that until now they were not allowed to, the US explicitly rules out providing the main form of weaponry the rebels call for, namely, portable anti-aircraft weapons for self-defence against Assad’s massive and massively used air power.

The second is that the initial declaration of the G8, announcing that the participants are “committed to achieving a political solution to the crisis based on a vision for a united, inclusive and democratic

Syria” and calling for peace talks to begin “as soon as possible”, made no mention of the Assad regime at all (some of the opposition were demanding agreement that Assad step down as a precondition), called for “a transitional governing body with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent”, calls for Syria’s public services to be “preserved or restored”, stressing, very importantly, that “*this includes the military forces and security services*”, expressed their deep concern with “the growing threat from terrorism and extremism in Syria” and called on both the regime and opposition forces to “destroy and expel from Syria all organisations and individuals affiliated to al Qaida and any other non state actors linked to terrorism”.

This explicit naming of Al-Qaida (meaning the Al-Nusra front, which fights the Assad regime but is not part of any of the opposition coalitions and often clashes with them as well), with no explicit mention of Hezbollah, and the call for both regime and opposition to take the war to Al-Nusra, combined with the stress on preservation of the core of the regime, including its military, really gives an idea of what this “transitional authority” will be about, and the fundamental strategy of imperialism in Syria.

UK prime minister David Cameron was not kidding when he explained several weeks ago that the US, Russia and UK “share the same aim: to find a solution to the conflict that ends the killing and *prevents violent extremism taking hold*, with a transitional government with full executive powers, established with the consent of both sides, that *preserves the integrity of the Syrian state and its institutions* [1].

At this stage, the opposition Syrian National Coalition has rejected the G8’s cynical call for it to fight Al-Nusra, declaring “the Assad regime is the only source of terrorism in Syria.”

This so-called “Yemeni solution”, involving some largely cosmetic changes of the top guard, while preserving the state apparatus and the core of the regime, but adding enough vetted members of the opposition to allow stabilisation, has been the imperialist project from the time it became clear that Assad would be unable to simply crush the revolt, and that his brutality would only lead to permanent instability and the continued strengthening of reactionary anti-imperialist sections of the radical Islamist forces, such as the Al-Nusra front, which is strongly connected to Al-Qaida.

It is important to understand this at the outset: that the “Libyan model”, whereby full-scale imperialist intervention tries to militarily bring the Syrian opposition to power in Damascus, has never even come close to being the preferred imperialist strategy in the US, UK, France or elsewhere; actually it has never been an option.

Understanding this allows us to understand that the combination of “tough talk” and ending arms embargoes with peace talks are two sides of the same coin: The US knows very well that increasing the number of small arms won’t even significantly affect the battlefield, but allows a form of pressure on the Assad regime in the context of Assad’s recent victories via use of massive anti-personnel weapons and Hezbollah invaders. If unchallenged, this could lead to Assad refusing to attend Geneva or putting up too many conditions, while also driving the poorly armed Syrian rebels further into the arms of the relatively well-armed Al-Nusra.

By the same token, the long delay after the last round of tough talk some 6-7 weeks earlier (when the media were full of “the US is about to”, or “may think about”, allowing arms to be provided to “vetted” Syrian rebel groups), and the fact that hardly any arms reached the rebels in that period, and that every time Obama opened his mouth since it has seemed less likely than ever, was also timed to help Assad go on the offensive to mop up a little before the proposed international conference, allowing pressure on the rebels to agree to participate at Geneva without their precondition of Assad agreeing to step down. The blatantly obvious withholding of arms from rebels

in southern Syria (see below) and then in the crucial battle of Qusayr makes this rather clear, as does the fact that the US has now finally moved on the question of arms as Assad and Hezbollah get carried away and head north to Aleppo.

The Syrian revolution continues - the forces involved

I will first clarify what I think is going on generally. The Syrian revolution, which broke out in February 2011 as a democratic mass revolt against the dictatorship, is still the fundamental fact. The fact that after eight months of slaughter by the regime revolt was forced to take up arms by late 2011 does not change that.

Countless reports from liberated towns about the nature of this democratic process, under attack from the dictatorship, for example in Taftanaz, Saraqeb [2], Qusayr [3], the Damascus outer suburb Duma [4], Sarmada [5], Idlib [6], Azaz [7], parts of Aleppo [8] and elsewhere, are examples which deal with the real-world difficulties of revolutionary democratic governance from below, but nevertheless reveal some semblance of popular structures that surely deserve defending against the dictatorship and its tanks, scud missiles and torture chambers, and which on the whole do not show evidence of imposition of sharia law or sectarian cleansing of minorities.

While a complete run-down of the various forces and organisations involved in Syria would require another article, for the sake of clarity it is worth noting that the liberated towns and networks of activists throughout Syria are connected via the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the main opposition force on the ground in Syria. It does not have a "political line" as it represents the spectrum of people's opinions involved in the revolution. Since the armed struggle began to dominate, the LCCs still organise all manner of demonstrations and other non-military actions.

Some units of the Syrian army refused to murder civilians and thus defected to the revolt; these armed groups all over Syria are called the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which likewise has no central chain of command or overriding "political" view as it is basically the armed wing of the LCC. Thus when leftists slander the FSA as a whole, either as dupes for imperialism (usually based on statements by some exile leader) or as jihadi extremists or criminals (based on actions of some rogue faction), they are in fact slandering the entire movement on the ground, as the overwhelming bulk of the armed forces are nothing other than these "council regimes" with arms to defend themselves, not under the effective control of exile-based leadership bodies, and not responsible for actions of any rogue group.

The neo-pacifist critique that some of the Western left have newly taken up, that says no matter how much you get slaughtered you should still turn the other cheek, can be countered by the following rather typical description of how the civil uprising became the armed uprising in the northern liberated town Taftanaz [9]:

"By April 2011, demonstrations were popping up all across the country. The Syrian army tried to cut them down, firing on and killing scores of civilians, only to inspire further protests. The mukhabarat, meanwhile, targeted the core activists in each town

... But the conscript army started to buckle, and some soldiers found they could not fire on their countrymen. I had met one of them in Turkey, a twenty-seven-year-old named Abdullah Awdeh. He was serving in the elite 11th Armored Division, which put down protests around the country, when one day he was directed to confront demonstrators near Homs. Their commander said that the protesters were armed terrorists, but when Awdeh arrived he saw only men and women with their families: boys perched atop their fathers' shoulders, girls with their faces painted in the

colors of the Syrian flag, mothers waving banners. He decided to desert.

By June 2011, there were hundreds like him; nearly every day, another uniformed soldier faced a camera, held up his military identity card, and professed support for the revolution for the entire world to see on YouTube. **These deserters joined what came to be known as the Free Syrian Army.** Awdeh, with his aviator sunglasses and Dolce & Gabbana jeans, assumed command of a group of nearly a hundred fighters.

Many activists worried about the militarization of the conflict, which pulled peaceful protesters into a confrontation with a powerful army that they could not defeat. **But in small towns like Taftanaz, where government soldiers had repeatedly put down demonstrations with gunfire and thrown activists in prison,** desperation trumped long-term strategy. Abu Malek likened the actions of the rebels to those of a mother: 'She may seem innocent, but try to take away her children and how will she act? Like a criminal animal. That's what we are being reduced to, in order to defend our families and our villages.

In Taftanaz, fighters from the FSA started protecting demonstrations, quietly standing in the back and watching for mukhabarat. For the first time, the balance of power shifted in favor of the revolution, so much so that government forces could no longer operate openly. Party officials and secret agents vanished, leaving the town to govern itself."

Let's be completely clear: these grassroots FSA fighters are what a section of the left has come to routinely slander as an imaginary "US-Saudi intervention allied with Al-Qaida making war on Syria". Should Assad's "anti-imperialist" scuds bomb them to bits to "defeat imperialism"? This is a concrete question. As is the question of why much of the neo-pacifist left believe these fighters should be denied better arms from wherever they can get them from.

Part of the issue many have is that many of the militias that fall under the broad umbrella of the FSA are Islamist militias. For example, the Farouk Brigades are partly associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (which has broad support in Syrian society, and which is regarded to be relatively "moderate" in Islamist terms and not classed as "salafist" or "jihadi"), but also contain secular fighters. Meanwhile, other militias within the FSA, which cannot be called "Islamist" in any political sense, adopt Islamic-sounding names, unsurprising in a Muslim country. This simply reflects the political broadness of Syrian society.

However, assertions that all fighting groups in Syria are Islamist (a claim, made for example by the *New York Times* and repeated ad nauseum in pro-Assad left websites) are simply untrue; anyone can, for example, look at the list of names of FSA militias that signed the LCC declaration noted above [10] to see a mixture of religious, non-religious and neutral names, for example "Falcons of the Land Brigade in Hama"; or the many that are just called after the name of their town, such as "Revolutionary Military Council in Deir Ezzor" or at the list of secular Syrian nationalist names associated with the National Unity Brigades of the FSA [11], such as the Abdel Rahman Al Shabandar Brigade (named after a Syrian Arab nationalist who organised the Iron Hand society against French rule); or for that matter the first fully Christian FSA brigade or the FSA brigade headed by a defecting female Alawite officer [12], hardly a symbol of Salafism.

Meanwhile, both the LCCs and the FSA should be distinguished from the exile leaderships, the Turkey-based Syrian National Congress (SNC) and the broader group that incorporates the SNC but is more representative, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (often shortened to "Syrian Coalition"), and the exile military leadership, the Supreme Military Council (SMC), which officially "leads" the FSA but in practice has no control over it on the ground.

All of these internal and external organisations should be further distinguished from the hard-line “salafist” militias outside of both the FSA and these political structures, which either belong to their own umbrella armed organisations, such as the Syrian Islamic Front to which the hard-line fundamentalist Ahrar al-Sham belongs, or Al-Nusra, which acts entirely on its own, of which more below.

The intellectually lazy amalgam made by the pro-Assad and neo-pacifist left between imperialism, exile opposition leaderships, the FSA, the LCCs, the jihadists, Al-Qaida and military struggle as a tactic - i.e., everything they don't like - gets them into serious problems with reality. If it is thus assumed that these imperialist-influenced exile leaderships have driven the innocent internal uprising to militarisation in order to “make war on Syria”, then the discussion between the grassroots military brigades in the town Taftanaz referred to above and the exile leadership makes for difficult reading:

"Had it been wise for the guerrillas to try to defend Taftanaz rather than retreat, as they had in other towns? It was a question that Malek said Riad al-Asaad, leader of the Free Syrian Army, had put to him at their headquarters in a Turkish border camp. "I shouted at him, 'Who are you to ask me anything?' " Malek recalled. " 'You sit here and eat and sleep and talk to the media! We're inside, we aren't cowards like you.'"

"When I asked Ibrahim Matar's commander in Taftanaz about the FSA leadership, he answered, "If I ever see those dogs here I'll shoot them myself." The Turkey-based commanders exert no control over armed rebel groups on the inside; each of the hundreds of insurgent battalions operate autonomously, although they often coordinate their activities."

Thus the Turkey-based “FSA” leadership, those who “sit and eat and sleep and talk to the media” and are most exposed to the imaginary imperialist conspiracy, who questioned the local FSA's decision to defend themselves with arms, and they responded with contempt to the suggestion that they should not try to defend our families.

Dangers to the Syrian revolution

However, armed conflict does have the potential to corrupt a movement in many ways, whether via the growth of revenge war crimes, an over reliance on military means, the enhancement of already existing sectarian dynamics, the tendency towards harsher and less rational ideologies (e.g. jihadism) and the avenues it gives to foreign interference.

Not all these negatives can negate a democratic revolution as such, unless we live in a dream world (see the excellent article “Syria or elsewhere there are no pure revolutions just revolutions” for this point [13]). However, if such factors reach a certain level, and they are combined, this could lead to a situation which is simply civil war between two equally undemocratic forces, as quantity becomes quality.

In my view, while all these factors exist at reasonably serious levels and should not be underestimated, it would be extremely premature to make this conclusion. Let's look at these factors one by one briefly.

First, like in all revolutions, the sheer brutality of the regime often results in brutality by the armed opposition forces (e.g., examples of killing captives etc). While criminal and indefensible, these actions take place within the context of the regime's extreme violence, and occur at a level dramatically more minor than the regime's systematic crimes. The LCC's code of conduct, signed by

dozens of FSA battalions, shows the lengths to which revolutionary forces have gone to try to rein in such activity [14], and such ongoing debate and condemnation by revolutionary forces is evidence that this alone cannot be used to equate the revolution with the regime, quite aside from the enormous difference in scale. While much was made by the mainstream media, pro-Assad leftists, rightists and Islamphobes the world over about the apparent bite into the heart of a dead regime soldier, shot in battle, less prominence was given to the energetic condemnation of this act by the FSA leadership and by the leadership of his particular brigade.

Indeed, the sheer hypocrisy of this focus on this single act can be highlighted by the reason the man, Abu Sakkar, claims to have been driven to this. By no account was this an attack on an innocent person or ordinary soldier, still less a sectarian attack on an Alawite as some claimed; after having had so many of his family killed by Assad's stormtroopers, it was when Sakkar found video on the phone of the soldier showing him raping and murdering a mother and her two daughters, that he was driven to his crazed act [15]. The minor cannibalism was symbolic, not the reason for killing the thug, which occurred in battle; yet for leftist and rightist moral hypocrites the world over, raising the heart of a dead man in uniform, who was also a murderer, to one's mouth is far worse than raping and killing live people and recording it for your kicks. Sakkar ran his own militia, Omar al-Farouq, and thus was not under the discipline, even formally, of the higher FSA structures, which, while condemning his act, were not in a position to expel him from anything.

Second, while taking up arms for self-defence was inevitable and eminently justifiable, it is certainly true that an over-reliance on military struggle can seriously distort a struggle. That is particularly the case if military struggle goes beyond defence on to a strategy to take the state militarily, *if it is in the context that the masses in certain regime-controlled regions are not also mobilising and/or remain grudgingly beholden to the regime*. In other words, a military offensive strategy can only really work, indeed only really be democratic, if it is strategically guided by the movement on the ground.

The FSA's military thrust into both Damascus and Aleppo contained grave dangers in this respect. The dangers have been limited to some extent by the fact that the FSA was simply unable to go beyond the parts of either city where it did have clear support among the masses, largely working-class areas containing a large proportion of recent migrants from the impoverished countryside, where the opposition is primarily based. It should be understood that there is a class basis to this division, something the pro-Assad leftists try not to dwell on: the FSA's roots are in the countryside and impoverished new urban areas around cities due to the Assad regime's turn to neoliberalism, which devastated the peasantry; the Sunni "business classes" in Damascus and Aleppo are one of the core supports to the regime (indeed, are organically attached to the regime). However, behind the bourgeoisie stands a large section of (Sunni and Christian) urban petty-bourgeoisie with little love for the regime, but with an understandable fear of the chaos an invading rural-based movement, especially one with an Islamist component, may bring to their lives if the revolutionary forces are not disciplined.

Thus, on the one hand, we see a flowering revolutionary-democratic council running the Damascus suburb of Douma [16] and also similar attempts in Aleppo [17]. However, the much more difficult situation in Aleppo also saw how the evolution of the struggle into a military clash along a divide, with constant regime bombing and shelling and a lack of resources for the rebel side to even run a police force, could cover for outright criminality (above all looting) by elements among the rebel forces, towards the very people in the areas that had supported them.

The outcome of this is even more complex: the Islamist militias, including the hard-line Ahrar Al-Sham and Al-Nusra, later expelled the mainstream FSA militias from much of the liberated territory, and in the process were welcomed by much of the population, because whatever else is wrong with

them, the consensus appeared to be that the Islamist hard-liners don't loot, and that they deal harshly with rebel criminality [18]. However, many others then chafe under the new reactionary Islamist laws, and now there is active fightback by revolutionary forces against both the Islamist repression and the thuggery of FSA elements [19]. In the meantime, the section of Aleppo under regime control is hardly encouraged to rise in order to replace Assad's regime of terror with either criminal militias or Islamist repression.

This brings us to the third danger, that of "salafist" forces, with an anti-democratic agenda, coming to dominate the movement and hence expunge its democratic content. Incidentally, the fact that in Aleppo this danger apparently grew stronger precisely as a reaction against indisciplined and criminal actions of some of the mainstream rebels indicates how wrong it is to conflate all these different issues. Nevertheless, it is true that the very ferocity of military struggle and regime terror can naturally increase the trend towards more extremist ideologies among the opposition.

While clearly growing stronger, there is no evidence that this trend has come to dominate the movement (see discussion above on the variety of militias within the FSA). There is however clearly a minority of truly reactionary forces that do threaten to impose an anti-democratic religious dictatorship. The recent murder of a 15-year old in Aleppo for "blasphemy" is an example of this. This murder was vigorously condemned by the Syrian Coalition, which called for punishment of the killers and described it as a "crime against humanity" [20].

Throwing the whole Syrian uprising into the "jihadi" camp and then washing one's clean distant Western hands of the atrocities on both sides may be convenient, but what it does is undermine the very forces within the revolution that confront this reactionary trend on a daily basis [21].

It is important to distinguish the anti-democratic nature of "salafism" as such from the fourth danger, that of the revolution degenerating into a sectarian war between largely Sunnis and Alawites. While extremist salafist groups are also likely sectarian (Al-Nusra explicitly is), whether the dynamic of open sectarian slaughter comes to pass is a different question. Islamic extremism is just as dangerous to secular Sunnis (and part of the reason for the reticence of sections of urban Sunni Damascus and Aleppo). Meanwhile, the sheer brutality of an Alawite-dominated regime could also make non-religious FSA fighters from the Sunni community turn anti-Alawite.

While either full-scale religious dictatorship or full-scale sectarian war would be totally reactionary outcomes, events in recent history, especially since the Iranian revolution, have shown that a democratic mass movement can often contain reactionary religious elements without them necessarily coming to dominate early on - the extent to which they do is largely determined by the power of the movement, as thousands of people do not come out in struggle for dictatorship, but for democracy; the anti-democratic forces rely on demobilisation or repression to assert themselves more forcefully, and their ultimate victory is not a given; and in any case we need to be careful of deeming every expression of Islam as "Islamic extremism."

In this context, a recent Reuters special series on Syria [22] indicates the complexity of this issue of Islamism and revolution. The town of Raqqa is in rural east Syria, the region dominated by salafist forces such as Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham (which opposes Al-Nusra's alliance with Al-Qaida and works more cooperatively with the FSA, but nevertheless also remains outside the FSA and any of the opposition political coalitions), while Aleppo is a major urban centre, where the mainstream FSA militias were initially in charge. Yet reading the series, one is struck by an apparently more open situation in Raqqa than currently in Aleppo.

Allowing of course for problems related to the reporters' perhaps limited and impressionistic research, the difference appears to be that, since Raqqa was taken outright by the armed opposition,

and is far enough away from the centre of things for the regime to not focus its massive firepower on it, this has allowed the non-salafist revolutionary forces and other people such as women's groups in Raqqa, empowered by their outright victory, to openly oppose the salafists' attempts to impose reactionary religious rules on them [23]. By contrast, Aleppo was only half-seized, via terrible conflict, and is in ongoing conflict with the regime; this state of siege has had opposite results, as described above.

Full-scale sectarian war, however, would be a more clear-cut reactionary situation from the outset, as it pits one section of the popular masses directly against the other, making revolution impossible.

The energetic support for elements among the Syrian rebels by the reactionary, anti-democratic monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar from early on (compared to the extreme hesitance of the US) can only be explained by their terror of a democratic revolution, and hence their aim to hijack it and turn it into a Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict to destroy the revolution from within, while also connected to their regional rivalry with Iran (and indeed with each other).

After much consideration, my conclusion is that the sectarian element has been exaggerated, and this Saudi-Qatari strategy has not been as successful as often thought, even though it certainly is present and serious.

There certainly has been a strengthening of the hard-line Islamist forces, such as Al-Nusra, or the equally fundamentalist Ahrar Al-Sham. This is largely due to them being much better armed than the mainstream and more secular opposition, whether by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or in Al-Nusra's case by private individuals from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf and other regional Islamist networks, including the open Iraqi border where Al-Nusra "becomes" Al-Qaida of Iraq. Al-Nusra itself not only advocates religious dictatorship but is unashamedly sectarian towards Alawites and Shiites.

In fact, there have been remarkably few open sectarian attacks, let alone massacres, on Alawi or Christian minorities by radical Sunni elements of the opposition (as opposed to general war crimes), especially compared to the horrific sectarian massacres and ethnic cleansing of Sunni towns by the regime.

Nevertheless some have certainly occurred, for example, Al-Nusra's massacre of 60 Shiite villagers in the far eastern Syrian town of Hatla in early June [24]. Even in this case, the massacre was allegedly in response to an attack on a rebel base by regime militia from that town, which happened to be Shiite, and thus the initial motivation may not have been specifically sectarian as opposed to revenge, but it clearly was a massacre of civilians and thus sectarian in effect anyway.

Moreover, the simple fact of leadership of a movement to replace the current regime by Sunni extremist groups, if that eventuated, would tend to have the required sectarian effect even without massacres. Alawites and Christians initially pro-revolution would tend to balk at being ruled by such forces, and if not rejoin the regime, at least desert the revolution or remain neutral, in the same way as continual massacres of Sunnis by an Alawite-dominated regime tends to drive them to the opposition and possibly to more extreme elements of it.

The massive intervention of the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah to aid the Assad regime's conquest of the Sunni town of Qusayr has given an enormous boost to this sectarian dynamic. To the extent that the movement heads in this direction, it is far more the fault of the regime itself; whatever its reactionary aims, the Saudi/Gulf intervention has simply not had the kind of success it aimed for, or is only starting to get more of it now after Hezbollah's reactionary and short-sighted intervention.

Saudi-Qatari adventure hits the rocks of rivalry and blow-back

The Saudi and Qatari offensive in any case does not entirely rely on full-scale sectarian war; if their particular hard-line Islamist supporters can distort the revolution enough for a Sunni Islamist-led regime to be “their” chess piece against Iran and against each other, and to not encourage democratic revolution (especially in places such as Shiite-majority Bahrain chafing under the Saudi-backed repression of the Sunni-minority princes), their purposes are largely served.

In any case, as an aside, an important snag in their strategy has been that Saudi Arabia and Qatar appear to hate each other as much as Iran and Syria and their backing of different Islamists has been quietly destructive inside the opposition.

Tiny Qatar has been “punching above its size” throughout the Arab Spring using the moderate Islamist Muslim Brotherhood to impose an Islamist dampener on the process (in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Palestine via Hamas), without openly confronting its democratic impulse. The Brotherhood (similar to the Turkish AKP, which has emerged as its ally) believes incremental Islamism can work with bourgeois democracy. The Brotherhood on the whole has also been less concerned with anti-Shia sectarianism; witness Egyptian Brotherhood leader Morsi’s overtures to Iran for example, and Qatar’s formerly good relations with Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia, however, hates the Muslim Brotherhood, due to its strongly republican impulses and bourgeois-democratic field of operation, which threaten the Saudi monarchical tyranny (aside from the fact that the Saudi version of fundamentalist Islam is starkly more extreme and repressive). Of course, Qatar is also a monarchy, but with such a small population with so much oil and thus such high per capita GDP it does not feel as threatened by revolution. This article on Saudi Arabia’s welcome to the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt explains this well (and of course the Saudis backed the “secular” Mubarak dictatorship) [25].

Therefore, Saudi Arabia tended to back more extremist Salafist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham (though Qatar tended to compete on that terrain as well), which were also more explicitly sectarian anti-Shia, to rival Qatar’s support for the Brotherhood. That turned out to be a very narrow field of operation, because as this tended to lead to the rise of Al-Nusra as the leading Salafist force, the Saudis got burnt fingers and withdrew, as Al-Qaida’s *raison d’être* is the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy and its replacement by an open clerical dictatorship, viewing the Saudi tyrants as tools of the West despite their identical ideologies.

Most analyses agree that around mid-2012, after having been the most enthusiastic backer of the Islamist wing of the uprising, Saudi support dried up. Its new drive to send arms (partially stifled by the US) from early 2013 took place from Jordan (whereas Qatari intervention tended to take place from Turkey in the north), now more directly aligned with the US strategy of finding one mainstream exile rebel leaderships that could be hijacked. The Jordan angle is important for the Saudis: Jordan borders both Syria and Saudi Arabia and is ruled by a monarchy whose main internal opponent is the Muslim Brotherhood.

Why the US and EU have not armed the opposition

With the current change of tack by the US in agreeing to send arms to the opposition, it is important to clarify why imperialism has been so hesitant about arming the Syrian opposition to date, why it took two years, before getting to the specific issues.

None of the pro-Assad left really explains why the US and EU have not been providing arms to the Syrian rebels all this time if they had really wanted to. Apparently arming every other reactionary tyrant or contra movement they choose to is easy, but when it comes to providing a few arms to a movement against a tyrannical regime that is using every possible means to crush it, apparently imperialists have to struggle for years with all kinds of legal restrictions. The idea that maybe they have neither intervened, nor even provided arms, because they don't want to is apparently too radical a proposal.

The general answer is that the US is opposed to the Syrian revolution; but since it exists (which never had anything to do with the US), it must try to hijack it; but to do that, it needs a "partner" that the US can control *and which can control the ranks of fighters on the ground in Syria*, i.e., control the revolutionary process and put it in the necessary straightjacket. But this is the key problem; the US does not have a partner, neither the Assad regime with its Hezbollah links; nor the reactionary Islamist forces such as Al-Nusra, to which it genuinely does not want any arms it may send to "vetted" sections of the FSA to seep to; nor the genuinely democratic-revolutionary forces on the ground in Syria who are not controllable by pliant exile leaderships.

This is why, despite all the talk about the need to arm non-jihadi FSA forces in order to reduce the jihadi influence, the US still took two years to do so. About the only leaders the US seems to have in its pockets are a few of the exile leadership, such as General Salem Idriss of the Supreme Military Command (SMC), a body set up by exile elements of the FSA leadership, which simply has no way of controlling the FSA as a whole and which has no central chain of command.

Before continuing, it is also important to understand what the Syrian rebels are up against when we hear lazy talk of the trickle of light weapons from abroad representing some great "war on Syria."

The Syrian regime possesses:

- Nearly 5000 tanks; 2500 infantry fighting vehicles; 2500 self-propelled or towed artillery units
- 325 tactical aircraft; 143 helicopters
- Nearly 2000 air defence pieces.

It has used all this massive equipment, all this military air power, scud missiles, cluster bombs and virtually anything against its own people and its own cities for more than 18 months, leaving 100,000 people dead, 2 million refugees across its borders and much of Syria covered in moonscapes [26]. This is the reality of what the Syrian people are up against.

Massive quantities of arms to rebels ... or rebels starved of arms?

What of the arms situation before this latest US turn? Many opposed to the Syrian revolution claim that, even if the US hasn't been directly sending arms until now, it has approved Saudi Arabia and Qatar supplying arms, and that these allegedly large quantities of arms "escalate" the conflict and encourage the rebels to go for a military solution, and this is part of the "imperialist war on Syria." However, *almost every article about alleged massive arms provision by these states, when read right through, show that the rebels on the ground have got next to nothing*. First some examples will be given, followed by some analysis of this glaring contradiction.

The May 21 *Washington Post* carried an article that claimed Saudi Arabia had recently sent 35 tons of weapons to the SMC leadership in Jordan [27]. In the same article, SMC commander General

Salim Idriss is reported as saying these weapons “aren’t advanced enough to combat Assad’s tanks and planes in Qusayr”. He said the only way there could be any “military balance” before the Geneva talks would be if the rebels could get “modern anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons”. He also claimed the rebel forces “are chronically short of ammunition”.

Perhaps Idriss is just angling for more. But even more important than his assertions was the reality on the ground at the time: this was during the Assad-Hezbollah siege of the Sunni city of Qusayr. The question is whether any of those 35 tons of weaponry in Jordan ever reached the FSA forces defending Qusayr; countless reports on the ground suggested the defenders had precious little to defend their town with, certainly not against the vast array of heavy weaponry Assad was using.

Moreover, Qusayr is not near Jordan; yet as was widely reported the previous week, Assad’s forces were able to re-take Khirbet Ghazaleh, a strategic town in the south, right near the Jordanian border, where the FSA had control of the border, and the SMC exile leadership (being trained and minded by 200 US troops based in Jordan) made sure the rebel defenders didn’t get a rifle, which “raised resentment among opposition fighters over what they saw as a lack of Jordanian support for their efforts to defeat Assad’s forces in the region, according to rebel commanders and activists in the area” [28]. If arms from Jordan couldn’t even get across a nearby border, how likely is it they got to Qusayr?

For another example, a recent *Financial Times* article made the unsubstantiated claim that Qatar has provided \$3 billion to the opposition in one form or another (presumably including arms, buying loyalty of individuals, aid to refugees etc.) [29].

Yet the same article, noting the “erratic and limited nature of weapons shipments”, quoted Mahmoud Marrouch, a young fighter from Liwaa al-Tawhid, a rural Aleppo group believed to be a major recipient of Qatari arms, saying that Qatar does a lot of promising but not delivering weapons. What the fighters have, he says, was seized from regime bases or purchased on the black market. “The Qataris and the Saudis need a green light from America to help us”, implying it is often not given.

An article on the role of the CIA in Turkey [30] (more below) likewise claimed the arms airlift from the Gulf “has grown to include more than 160 military cargo flights by Jordanian, Saudi and Qatari military-style cargo planes” landing in Turkey or Jordan since early 2012, estimated to be 3500 tons of military equipment.

Yet once again, on the ground:

“Still, rebel commanders have criticized the shipments as insufficient, saying the quantities of weapons they receive are too small and the types too light to fight Mr. Assad’s military effectively ... “The outside countries give us weapons and bullets little by little”, said Abdel Rahman Ayachi, a commander in Soqor al-Sham, an Islamist fighting group in northern Syria. He made a gesture as if switching on and off a tap. “They open and they close the way to the bullets like water”, he said.”

Thus rhetoric about “massive” quantities of arms going to the rebels from the Gulf and “escalating the war” needs to be taken with entire silos full of salt. What then is behind this apparent contradiction?

CIA coordination of weapons shipments?

An article “Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.” from the March 24 *New York*

Times [31], has often been quoted by those who want to show that the US is already involved. And the article does show this. But what it also shows about the US is far from what those highlighting this often want to show. Indeed, one may ask, *does the CIA's role in this operation have anything to do with the contradiction noted?* To answer, one need go not further than the article itself, which describes the CIA's specific role in the following terms:

*"The C.I.A. role in facilitating the shipments, he said, gave the United States a degree of influence over the process, including trying to **steer weapons away from Islamist groups and persuading donors to withhold portable anti-aircraft missiles** that might be used in future terrorist attacks on civilian aircraft. "These countries were going to do it one way or another", the former official said."They weren't asking for a 'Mother, may I?' from us."*

But the rebels were clamoring for even more weapons, continuing to assert that **they lacked the firepower to fight a military armed with tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers and aircraft**. Many were also complaining, saying they were hearing from arms donors that **the Obama administration was limiting their supplies and blocking the distribution of the anti-aircraft and anti-armor weapons** they most sought."

To summarise: the arming of the Syrian rebels was a Saudi-Qatari initiative, who were not asking US permission; the US steps in to help "coordinate" it by "limiting supplies", "steering weapons away" from groups they don't like and making sure that none of the weapons the rebels actually needed to fight Assad's heavy weaponry, e.g. anti-aircraft missiles, got through to the rebels.

Another report by Nour Malas in the *Wall Street Journal* was even more explicit [32], pointing out that "the Pentagon and CIA ramped up their presence on Turkey's southern border" precisely after more weapons began to flow in to the rebels in mid-2012, especially small numbers of portable anti-aircraft weapons (Manpads), some from Libya, "smuggled into the country through the Turkish border", others "supplied by militant Palestinian factions now supporting the Syrian uprising and smuggled in through the Lebanese border", or some even bought from regime forces.

*"In July, **the U.S. effectively halted the delivery of at least 18 Manpads sourced from Libya**, even as the rebels pleaded for more effective anti-aircraft missiles to counter regime airstrikes in Aleppo, people familiar with that delivery said."*

Finally, the reporter Joanna Paraszczuk explained that a US-Saudi conflict has been going on for some time:

*"While Saudi Arabia has built up large stockpiles of arms and ammunition for the Free Syrian Army, the US blocked shipments until last Thursday. The US and the Saudis are involved in a multilateral effort to support the insurgency from Jordanian bases. But, according to the sources, **Washington had not only failed to supply "a single rifle or bullet to the FSA in Daraa" but had actively prevented deliveries**, apparently because of concerns over which factions would receive the weapons. The situation also appears to be complicated by Jordan's fears that arms might find their way back into the Kingdom and contribute to instability there. The sources said the Saudi-backed weapons and ammunition are in warehouses in Jordan, and insurgents in Daraa and Damascus could be supplied "within hours" with anti-tank rockets and ammunition. The Saudis also have more weapons ready for airlift into Jordan, but US representatives are preventing this at the moment." [33]*

Some comments can be made here. First, this report strongly confirms the US role has been the exact source of the contradiction between alleged "massive arms supplies" and the rebels having nothing much on the ground. Second, the report makes clear that the failure to supply weapons to

the rebels in the strategic south Syrian town, noted above, was directly due to US pressure. Third, the concern about who gets the weapons is probably particularly strong in that region for two main reasons. First, the report notes concern about weapons going back into Jordan and creating “instability”. This refers to the fact that Jordan’s concern has never been Assad, but on the contrary, the danger that a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced regime could lead the powerful Jordanian section of the Brotherhood, the main Jordanian opposition, to overthrow the monarchy. Second, southern Syria is near the border of the Israeli-occupied Golan, and Israel has made it continually clear that it prefers Assad’s army on the border, which it has protected for 40 years, to any of the Syrian rebels.

All those demanding *the withdrawal of the US from the Middle East* in all forms, including ending its interference in Syria, need to reckon with the fact that this would mean the lesser powers involved in supporting the Syrian opposition would have been far more free to *send any arms they wanted, especially anti-aircraft missiles, to whoever they wanted without the CIA preventing them.*

US wants to use FSA to strike Al-Nusra to prove loyalty?

What else does the US role involve? And was the US demanding anything else of the SMC/FSA leadership that might explain the extreme reluctance to provide it with arms for so long?

What is a good way to prove you are willing to be a compliant group of puppets? How about agreeing to become a strike force for the US against Al-Nusra and other “jihadis”?

According to a May 9 article by Phil Sands [34], Syrian rebel commanders met US intelligence officers in Jordan six months earlier to discuss the possibility of the US supplying arms. “But according to one of the commanders present at the meeting, the Americans were more interested in talking about Jabhat Al-Nusra”, especially about “the locations of their bases”. “Then, by the rebel commander’s account, the discussion took an unexpected turn. *The Americans began discussing the possibility of drone strikes on Al-Nusra camps inside Syria and tried to enlist the rebels to fight their fellow insurgent*”, offering to train 30 FSA fighters a month to fight Al-Nusra.

When the Syrians at the meeting protested that opposition forces, at this stage at least, need to unite against Assad’s far more powerful army rather than war among themselves, a US intelligence officer replied: *“I’m not going to lie to you. We’d prefer you fight Al-Nusra now, and then fight Assad’s army. You should kill these Nusra people. We’ll do it if you don’t.”*

This is not the only indication of such a role being demanded of the rebels as the price for support. A recent *Financial Times* article [35] claims that at the recent “Friends of Syria” conference, the National Coalition “issued principles that pleased western foreign ministers but for now at least, had no particular relevance to people inside Syria”, including the declaration’s denunciation of “radical/extremist elements in Syria which follow an agenda of their own” (i.e. Al-Nusra).

The article then quotes Colonel Akaidi, the military defector now heading the Aleppo military council, who claims “the US wants to turn people like him into the Sahwa, the tribal groups in Iraq that were enlisted by the US to fight al-Qaeda”, but his view is that “if they [the US] help us so that we kill each other, then we don’t want their help”.

France has also been explicit about this. On June 23, France’s president, Francois Hollande, told Syrian rebels to “retake control of these areas” that have fallen in to the hands of extremist Islamist groups “and push these groups out” so that they don’t “benefit from the chaos in the future” (<http://www.dailystar.com>); this was a necessary condition for the lifting of the EU arms embargo being translated into any actual French arms getting to the rebels.

Curiously, despite this furious hostility of imperialism towards Al-Nusra, the European Union's recent lifting of the embargo on Syrian oil seems to have benefited Al-Nusra, as most of this oil is in the north-eastern region mostly controlled by Al-Nusra.

This appears to be most likely a miscalculation, especially given that the UN Security Council had just subjected Al-Nusra to sanctions and a global asset freeze, at the initiative of Britain and France [36], meaning the group won't be in much of a position to sell its assets.

Or, if not a miscalculation, was this move aimed precisely at goading the SMC/FSA exile leadership into this imperialist-preferred war with Al-Nusra? According to the May 19 *Guardian* [37]:

*"The impact is immediately visible. With a new independent source of funding, the jihadists holding the oilfields between al-Raqqqa and Deir Ezzor **are much better equipped than their Sunni rivals**, reinforcing the advantage originally provided by Qatari backing. They have been able to provide bread and other essentials to the people in the areas under their control, securing an enduring popular base.*

This serves to marginalise the western-backed rebels, the National Coalition and the Supreme Military Council (SMC), even further. The blustering claim by the SMC commander, Salim Idriss, that he was going to muster a 30,000 force to retake the oilfields served only to undermine his credibility."

Idris's alleged claim that he would send 30,000 fighters to re-take the oilfields sounds exactly like the kind of war "to kill each other" the FSA colonel in Aleppo was complaining about above.

Interestingly, not all the oil is in the region under Al-Nusra control - part of it is in the region under the control of Syria's Kurdish minority, which, given the recent peace agreement between Turkey and the PKK and Turkey's current rapprochement with Iraqi Kurds against the Iraqi Shiite regime, could perhaps benefit Turkey.

Imperialist-orchestrated jihadi uprising?

In light of all the above facts about the US and EU desire for the Syrian rebels to take the fight to Al-Nusra and other "extremists", it is worthwhile, as an aside, returning to the cartoonish schema drawn up by the pro-Assad left, that the Syrian conflict is an imperialist war on Syria where imperialism, via its Saudi and Gulf allies, is using Islamic extremists and jihadists, including Al-Qaida, to destroy the country.

Considering most supporters of the Syrian revolution oppose both imperialist intervention and reactionary Islamists such as Al-Nusra, it may suit our purposes well to half-support this kind of discourse, and say, "yes, the US supports reactionary Islamists with the aim of diverting the genuine uprising into a sectarian war and undermining the revolution". Indeed, I think Saudi Arabia and Qatar have tried to do this, but I see neither as mere imperialist tools. However, there is a slight problem: reality. It is preferable to not use obvious nonsense to back one's view.

The world is more complicated than all reactionaries simply lining up on the same side (even cartoons are better than cartoonish-left analysis). Just as it is possible for both the Assad regime and the US to be reactionary, so likewise it is possible for Al-Nusra to be reactionary yet still hate and be hated by both the US and Assad.

And as for the Syrian revolution, the fact that Syrians went out into the streets to denounce the US

when it labelled Al-Nusra a terrorist organisation [38], chanting “there is no terrorism in Syria except Assad”, makes the allegation that they are US puppets as absurd as the idea that the US is backing Al-Nusra. If that then suggests they support Al-Nusra and its reactionary politics, and the revolution is just an Islamist one, then one would have to read the countless links I point to above with protests, demonstrations, declarations, clashes etc. against the hard-line Islamists. It is just that they didn’t want the US telling them what to do, and that they wanted to focus on the main enemy first and not have the anti-Assad ranks clashing.

Imagine: a revolutionary movement that refuses to take orders from imperialism, refuses to bow to reactionary Islamists, when imperialism tells them to fight the Islamists; to some that is a movement that is but a tool for imperialist-backed Islamists. Better get used to the idea that the world is more complicated than that.

Attitude to Syrian rebels getting arms and ‘our’ governments sending them

Given the balance of military forces, between a massively armed regime, which uses enormous quantities of mass-murdering firepower against largely defenceless civilians, and rebel forces, most arising directly from the revolution, with short supplies of light arms, the Syrian revolutionary forces have the right to get quality arms, including anti-aircraft weapons, to defend themselves from whoever wants to supply them. It is not up to socialists within imperialist countries to demand our governments not provide arms just because we understand our governments aims are different to ours and such arming demands a political price from the rebels.

In any case, those terribly frightened about the prospect of a trickle of arms reaching the rebels from the wrong people should console themselves with the fact that the main role of the US and other imperialist powers has been to deny arms to the rebels and even intervene to prevent them receiving arms of decent quality or quantity.

However, given this general situation, the question arises: should supporters of the Syrian revolution therefore be advocating our “own” imperialist rulers send massive quantities of arms to the rebels? And if so, would this be equivalent to calling for deeper imperialist intervention, or even effectively for war on the Syrian regime?

In brief, my answers are no, but also no and no.

If imperialist states, after 2.5 years of watching the slaughter, finally do provide some arms to Syrian fighters, who do all the fighting themselves, with their own aims, for their own revolution which they have made and shed blood for, it is wrong to call this “intervention” in any meaningful sense.

Apparently, US blocking arms all this time (while the regime with overwhelming military superiority continues to be further massively and openly armed by Russia and Iran), and the EU embargo on arms, was not intervention, but ending such embargoes is. On the contrary, I regard the EU arms embargo on the besieged revolutionary people to have been an act of intervention, and its lapsing an act of non-intervention. Whether or not one sees an actual move by the Britain and France to send arms to be intervention or not, at this point both governments have declared they have no plans to do so, and the EU as a whole immediately made a joint declaration that it would not proceed to deliver any military equipment.

In any case, the aim of the new type of “intervention” is to attempt to sway sections of the rebel leadership, to try to hijack the revolution, not to launch the revolution against Assad which has been entirely Syrian-made and never had anything to do with US or imperialist support. And there is very

little guarantee such attempts to hijack will be successful, given the lack of control the exile leadership has over the rebel ranks. The premise that a genuine locally based movement is turned into an imperialist stooge merely by the receipt of arms has never been a logical one, neither in this case nor in any other.

In that case, why shouldn't we call on "our" imperialist governments to send arms, if we support the right of these people to get them?

We should not call on our governments to do anything whatsoever in the Middle East, other than to completely evacuate all troops, military bases, warships, embargoes and so on entirely from the region, and cut off all aid, military or otherwise, to Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, and any other repressive regime.

Imperialism's overall role in the region has always been reactionary by definition, so we cannot demand our governments do anything, because we understand that any bolstering of their position in the region can only give it a stronger position to carry out its overall counterrevolutionary role, regardless of whatever small tactical concessions it may sometimes make to the side of liberation. The very fact that over these two years of massacre the US has refused to provide arms, has vetted and restricted the arms others supply, has ensured no heavier weapons get to the opposition, has encouraged the FSA to attack Al-Nusra, all point to the counterrevolutionary nature of US involvement with Syria, and therefore we should not be giving the US advice to do anything that would inevitably be in its interests, rather than those of the Syrian masses.

However, if the US or other imperialist states did decide for their own reasons to provide some arms, we should also *not* protest against it, robotic style. Any leftists choosing to stand on a street corner to protest against some US arms getting to people who are currently massively outgunned by a murderous regime, allowing them to protect themselves just a little better than now, open themselves to justified parody. Neither "demand" they do nor "demand" they don't!

It is curious that many have argued that the end of the EU arms embargo, and the recent US announcement that it may provide some light arms, amounts to a "massive escalation of the war". Apparently, two years of Assad's scorched earth, the slaughter of 100,000 people, the creation of millions of refugees, including 2 million in neighbouring countries, the reduction of much of the country to a moonscape, the murderous sieges of towns such as Qusayr recently, Homs yet again now, the horrific sectarian cleansing of Bayda and Baniyas several weeks ago, the ongoing massacres of all kinds of popular protest, even the massacre of dozens of students inside campus buildings by aerial attack, all the time with massive Russian and Iranian arms provision, do not constitute that much of a problem compared to a situation in which the outgunned populace may get a few more light weapons to just slightly better protect themselves with - only the latter is "escalation". I believe no comment is necessary.

At the same time, while the Syrian opposition should in principle be able to get as many arms as it can from anywhere it can, it could be argued that *just at the moment*, it may be *tactically* wise to not emphasise this point (except if arms could get directly to those defending besieged places such as Qusayr yesterday or Homs today), in order to give maximum chances to the possibility of a ceasefire arising out of the US-Russian Geneva process.

That is not to have any great illusions in the aims of either the US or Russia or others involved in trying to bang heads together and bring about a Yemeni solution; they do this for their own reasons. However, given the deep divisions within Syrian society, deepened by the civil war and the rise of sectarianism on both sides, there is no "military solution" in Syria in the sense of a victorious armed rebel movement, as now constituted, marching to power in Damascus. The long-term stalemates in

both Damascus and Aleppo, as well as the hardening of an Alawite-dominated coastal region and an Al-Nusra-dominated east, are evidence enough of that. Therefore, any ceasefire that may be gained from the Geneva process, or a different process, would be a necessary breathing space for the movement, to allow popular mobilisation to revive. Especially given the sheer horror of the continuing war and its effects on all Syrians.

Therefore, to be focusing on demanding more arms in general at this moment could impact negatively on the possibilities of a ceasefire. I want to stress however that this is only a tactical consideration - we must remember that it is the regime imposing the military solution, and it is thoroughly shameful that people on the left, who traditionally solidarised with the oppressed and supported their right to resist bloody repression, now blame the victims for fighting back and call it "escalation".

But what if ...?

The fact of the Geneva process and the long-term imperialist preference for the Yemini solution makes it extremely unlikely that the quantities of arms delivered to the rebels under the "new policy" will have any decisive effect, though it may lead to small tactical reverses to Assad's forces. None have been in evidence so far.

And arguing here against a military solution is also not an argument against the imperialist powers, as if they are pushing such a solution; for their own reasons, they are not. Indeed, given the relationship of forces, the only possible military solution would be if the US or NATO carried out the "Libyan solution" and brought the opposition to power riding a massive imperialist onslaught - something that has never been on the cards.

However, this does not mean a deeper level of imperialist intervention is impossible or even unlikely. There is the slippery slope argument; once the US does begin to send more serious arms, there will be pressure to protect supply routes, to set up no-fly zones in border areas of Syria controlled by US warplanes, leading to pressure to ground the Syrian air-force. While so far the Obama administration has ruled this out and these have largely been opportunistic calls from right-wingers out of power, there is the possibility of one thing slipping into another and imperialist intervention sliding out of control.

Then there is the "just got to do something" argument: given the continuation of massive instability in Syria, which is not in long-term imperialist interests (though short term it can be useful for Sunni and Shiite Islamists, including Al-Nusrah and Hezbollah, to kill each other), and given precisely the lack of any clear "partners" in Syria, there is the slight possibility of imperialist leaders deciding they really need their own forces to take control of the situation, even if no obvious solution is at hand. If there were to be an imperialist intervention, it would be this kind, involving the most imperialist control of the process. That is most preferable to Israel, which otherwise is far more comfortable with the Assad regime (preferably under less Hezbollah influence than currently) than with any of the Syrian opposition groups with which the US might otherwise try to use.

While unlikely, if intervention were to eventuate, there should be no illusions that this would offer anything positive to the Syrian people. I make this point because I know there are sections of the pro-Syrian revolution left that have tended to suggest some kind of imperialist intervention may not be an entirely bad thing if it doesn't involve imperialist troops overrunning the country and the initiative remains with the forces on the ground. Some at the North Star Network - with whom I have substantial agreement on the Syrian revolution in general and I much appreciate their solid analysis - have hinted this way before, though I don't think it has been spelt out clearly for some

time and hopefully there has been some rethinking.

In any case, below is a list of solid reasons why this is a very wrong-headed idea – these are the likely outcomes of a direct imperialist escalation:

- A huge increase in killing on all sides – an actual escalation – would be first immediate effect, not only of countless civilians inevitably killed as imperialist missiles and fighter jets match those of Assad in unconventional butchery, but also a likely “rush” by Assad and his regime to grab what they can from the chaos (the fact that the onset of NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 led to an immediate dramatic, indeed qualitative, increase in the level of butchery meted out by Milosevic’s racist regime against the Kosovar Albanians);
 - The bolstering of Assad’s entirely fake Arab nationalist “credentials” as a result of being bombed (and is it coincidental entirely that Assad’s recent battlefield ascendancy occurred almost entirely since the day of the Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah-bound missiles in Damascus in early May);
 - The further evaporation of the non-military aspect of the movement and the further entrenching of the power of military commanders, not necessarily even those favoured by imperialism but as an inevitable outcome of such militarisation, with the anti-democratic flow-on effects later (see the power of the “militias” in Libya, disconnected from the real movement, still causing much trouble);
 - A likely orgy of revenge on both sides as the idea of “finality outside our control” approaches as death is rained from the sky on both sides;
 - The fact that imperialism has only ever had the “Yemeni solution” in mind in any case meaning that this kind of catastrophe would only serve to oust Assad and a narrow clique while keeping most of his political, bureaucratic, security and military apparatus intact (is that worth it?);
 - Or if the logic of the situation forced imperialism to move from a Yemeni to a Libyan solution, such a forced defeat, by a foreign imperialist power, of the sections of the Syrian masses still attached to Assad, however grudgingly, will be rightly viewed by them as a foreign conquest, and the effects would be virulently undemocratic;
 - Such a move could also result in imperialism engaging in orgies of irrational destruction as occurred in Libya – regardless of years of disinterest in confronting Assad, wars once decided on have their own logic. For example, in early 2011, the US was still doing great deals with Gaddafi, and he was happily torturing Islamist suspects for the US; yet after he fell in August, the US bombed his hold-out town of Sirte for another two months, as Libyan “rebels” besieged from the ground [39], which look so much like the results Assad has achieved throughout Syria [40].
 - As a result of this, the development of an entirely reactionary consciousness on both sides, with the defeated pro-Assad sections of the masses tying support for the tyrant to a false “anti-imperialism”, while those believing imperialism “liberated” them would tend to adopt a cravenly pro-imperialist viewpoint (again one of the outcome of the NATO war in Kosova);
 - A country emerging more wrecked even than Assad has left it, even more dependent on imperialism and on international loan sharks for recovery;
- An imperialist presence on the border of Israeli-occupied Golan, which would be every bit as loyal to preserving the Zionist peace-of-the-conquest as the Assad regime has been for 40 years, even more loyal in fact, whereas among the revolutionary forces fighting Assad are those who would be much more likely to challenge this status quo, as Israel well knows and has therefore continually expressed its preference for Assad;

- A more solidly entrenched imperialist position in the region, against the interests of the Palestinians and Iran against Israeli or US attack. Critics will rightly say that this would be the fault of Assad's terror allowing an opportunistic imperialist intervention to strengthen its hand; the Syrian masses shouldn't be forced to sacrifice their lives forever and what occurs elsewhere cannot really be blamed on them seeking liberation from the regime. I agree entirely.

Given all the above points, it seems clear enough that no great liberation for the Syrian masses would come of this, and so could hardly be considered a worthwhile gain given the loss to imperialism throughout the region. This is a partial list which many could add to.

Whatever the case, this is not the current situation, and should not be used to argue in support of the Assad regime which is now the one carrying out this unconventional slaughter and destruction of its country, not the future possibility of the US or NATO doing it.

Rather than demagogically denounce every new rifle that gets to a desperate Syrian oppositionist as evidence of a "war on Syria", we need to keep our focus on the actual war on Syria being waged by the regime and continue declare: "Solidarity with the heroic Syrian people's uprising!"

Michael Karadjis

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3434>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-05-17/cameron-and-putin-hold-syria-talks>

[2] <http://world.time.com/2012/07/24/a-dispatch-from-free-syria-how-to-run-a-liberated-town/>

[3] <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2013/03/syria-witness-running-the-town-of-qusayr-without-assad-81450/#ixzz2NdfWSbWK>

[4] See on ESSF (article 27423), [Syria: Free Duma - popular councils and democracy from below](#).

[5] <http://syriasurvey.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/local-governance-in-sarmada.html>

[6] <http://syriasurvey.blogspot.com.au/2012/12/what-to-do-with-idlibs-islamists.html>

[7] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-rebels-tackle-local-government/2013/04/30/3f2181d8-b1b9-11e2-baf7-5bc2a9dc6f44_story.html

[8] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1103/In-rebel-held-Aleppo-Syrian-civilians-try-to-impose-law-through-courts-not-guns>

[9] See on ESSF (article 29370), [Welcome to Free Syria - Meeting the rebel government of an embattled country](#).

- [10] See on ESSF (article 28381), [Syria: New Battalions Sign the Code of Conduct](#).
- [11] <http://darthnader.net/2012/10/17/interview-with-member-of-the-national-unity-brigades-of-the-fsa/>
- [12] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/10/20121022105057794364.html>
- [13] On ESSF (article 29372), [Syria or elsewhere, there are no pure revolutions, just revolutions...](#)
- [14] See on ESSF (article 28381), [Syria: New Battalions Sign the Code of Conduct](#).
- [15] see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23190533>
- [16] See on ESSF (article 27423), [Syria: Free Duma - popular councils and democracy from below](#).
- [17] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/1103/In-rebel-held-Aleppo-Syrian-civilians-try-to-impose-law-through-courts-not-guns>
- [18] a good description at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-syria-rebels-islamists-specialreport-idUSBRE95I0BC20130619>
- [19] See on ESSF (article 29373), [Syria: the people will not kneel and will not accept any new tyranny!](#).
- [20] <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=478723065546817&set=a.437287806357010.1073741828.436337196452071&type=1&theater>
- [21] for examples of popular demonstrations against these currents and their actions, see <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com>, for countless photos of demonstrations with anti-sectarian slogans see <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com>, other anti-sectarian actions, declarations, struggles etc., see <http://darthnader.net>, <http://www.aljazeera.com> and <http://www.jadaliyya.co>, and <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2013/07/08/syria-the-people-will-not-kneel-and-will-accept-no-injustice>
- [22] and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/20/us-syria-rebels-governance-specialreport-idUSBRE95J05R20130620>
- [23] other reports back up this assessment, for example, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/04/the-black-flag-of-raqqa.html>, or this women's demonstration against the salafists in Raqqa: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=9hOsyH7zasw
- [24] see <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jun-16/220541-qaeda-linked-militants-blow-up-shiite-hall-in-syria-activists.ashx#axzz2WQuWjkI3>

- [25] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/saudi-arabia-glad-to-see-morsi-go.html>
- [26] such as in these photos: <http://syriawitness.middleeastvoices.com>
- [27] http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-21/opinions/39412628_1_geneva-idriss-weapons
- [28] <http://news.yahoo.com/assads-forces-capture-strategic-town-southern-syria-034605544.html>
- [29] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html#axzz2TeyItOcb>
- [30] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&
- [31] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- [32] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443684104578062842929673074.html>
- [33] <http://eaworldview.com/2013/06/23/syria-special-the-us-saudi-conflict-over-arms-to-insurgents/>
- [34] <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/americas-hidden-agenda-in-syrias-war>
- [35] http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/71e492d0-acdd-11e2-9454-00144feabdc0,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2F71e492d0-acdd-11e2-9454-00144feabdc0.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Flinks.org.au%2Fnode%2F3434
- [36] <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nowsyrialatestnews/syrian-islamists-to-be-added-to-un-sanctions-list-diplomats-say>
- [37] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/19/jihadists-control-syrian-oilfields>
- [38] <http://www.dailystar.com>
- [39] with results like this: <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article29405.htm>
- [40] e.g., <http://syriawitness.middleeastvoices.com>