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Syria:

# Threat still looms of U.S. attack on Syria

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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**Washington's agreement to pursue a diplomatic route to secure the disarmament of Syria's chemical arsenal produced sighs of relief the world over from opponents of a new Middle East war. The threat of an imminent U.S. missile attack on that nation, an attack that would undoubtedly lead to civilian deaths and a weakening of the position of the grassroots democratic elements in the struggle against Assad, has appreciably lessened.**

It is important to recognize, however, that the threat of war remains real. The Obama administration is, on the one hand, using the UN process to lay the groundwork necessary to garner future international support for a direct U.S. intervention. On the other hand, it is stepping up the flow of arms to the sections of the anti-Assad forces they deem most useful to their long-term project of maintaining U.S. dominance over the resources of the broader region.

On Sept. 27, the UN Security Council approved a resolution that demanded that Syria allow an international team to destroy its chemical weapons. This resolution is understood as not authorizing automatic punitive action if the process is not completed to the UN's satisfaction. At the same time, however, the resolution does assert that should Syria not comply fully, the UN should impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Chapter VII mandates sanctions, and if sanctions fail, "such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security."

The Sept. 27 resolution is interpreted by The New York Times and Washington Post as requiring a second Security Council vote for the instigation of military action by a UN-authorized force. Nonetheless, the vote marks the first time that the Security Council, previously constrained by Russian and Chinese objections, has unanimously moved to censure the Syrian government. The U.S. is unlikely to have agreed to a resolution that could not be used, if necessary, as a stepping stone on the path toward greater international support for direct imperialist intervention.

Indeed, according to a Sept. 29 Reuters article, just a few days after the passage of the chemical weapons resolution, Security Council members began considering the demand that Syria allow humanitarian convoys from neighboring countries to enter and travel inside of Syria.

While the actual humanitarian crisis of the Syrian people is very grave—the U.S. and its allies have not come close to fulfilling their already inadequate aid quotas for the nearly 2 million refugees already outside the country—the demand to allow convoys from Turkey and Jordan, both of which are collaborating with the CIA to send arms and fighters to Syria, is suspect. "Humanitarian corridors" and like proposals have more than once been used for the very non-humanitarian and imperialist ends of weapons and troop supply.

In short, the UN Security Council action is a double-edged sword that has delayed U.S. missile strikes but given new authority to outside intervention into Syria. According to a Sept. 11 article in the Washington Post, the administration's shift to diplomatic strong-arming was also accompanied by a very public boost in arms deliveries to the pro-imperialist sections of the opposition forces. A July 2 article by David Ottaway in The National Interest reports that the U.S. is also looking the other way while the Saudi government supplies non-U.S.-made surface-to-air missiles. In the last year, most U.S. military aid has been delivered covertly, in collaboration, variously, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Libya.

Heavy arms, and well-armed Islamist forces backed by these countries, have been flowing into the country for some time. The New York Times estimates that around 6000 foreign fighters, from countries as far afield as Chechnya, are part of the coalition in northern Syria that has just declared its independence from the exile opposition Syrian National Council. A conservative estimate of the total number of foreign fighters currently in Syria is 10,000. These forces,

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along with Syrian sectarian allies, have been fighting not only with the Syrian government forces, but also against the militias of local grassroots activists who fear Islamic rule and oppose an Islamic state.

While reactionary Islamist forces remain only a portion of the opposition forces under arms, they control large swaths of northern Syria. Their touted fighting skills have undoubtedly contributed to the fact that, according to the Syrian Observatory on Human Rights, over 40% of the 120,000 deaths caused by the fighting so far have been well-equipped Syrian soldiers.

While many grassroots community groups have protested Islamic rule, many of the secular bourgeois leaders of the Free Syrian Army have, instead, collaborated with the foreign and Islamist troops. On Sept. 7, on the occasion of the seizure of the al-Menagh airbase by a multinational group of foreign fighters, the British Telegraph reported that the Free Syrian Army chief in Aleppo, Abdul-Jabbar al-Aqidi, had confirmed that the FSA was providing weapons to these foreign fighters.

The Syrian youths and working people who justifiably rose up in March and April of 2011 to protest the corruption, economic policies, and authoritarianism of the Assad regime thus find themselves in an increasingly difficult position. According to Dr. Vijay Prashad from Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., many towns in northern Syria are now under the control of reactionary Islamist forces that have imposed harsh and unpopular social restrictions on the population. In the south of the country, despite several well-publicized attempts by democratic-minded local leaders to bring the military struggle under the political control of local town councils that have remained loyal to the goals of original struggle, the secular armed forces seem to have been increasingly consolidated in the hands of Syrian elites who have marginalized the town committees, welcomed foreign fighters, and demanded direct U.S. military intervention.

How did this situation come about? According to the Syrian human rights leader, Haytham Manna, the original demands of the first demonstration of the uprising in Dar'a in March of 2011 were "Death rather than Oppression" and "Rami the Thief." Rami Makhoulf, the subject of the second slogan, is a cousin to Assad, and the wealthiest man in Syria. Makhoulf, considered a reliable political ally to the Assads, was granted extraordinary opportunities to amass wealth during the privatizations of Syria's national patrimony that came with the Assad family's introduction of neoliberal economic "reform." His obscene wealth and power were a symbol of the corruption that ordinary people deem responsible for the downward spiral of the standard of living in Syria.

For the ordinary Syrian, opposition to joblessness, corruption, and authoritarianism were inextricably intertwined with their fight to enter fully into the real political life of Syria. For a great number of Syrians of the upper middle classes, however, opposition to Makhoulf's plundering was not based on egalitarian concerns, but on getting their fair share of the loot.

According to Manna, who sat on the exile Syrian National Council representing a coalition of 13 political parties associated with the old Stalinist and Nasserist movements of Syria, many of the businessmen who funded the SNC conferences were former partners of Makhoulf who had fallen out with him over business deals. Relationships between these businessmen and the main U.S. ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, had been built over time through commercial and financial negotiations. It is no surprise that the elite forces that dominated first the Syrian National Council, and now dominate the Syrian National Coalition, are focused on salvation via imperialist intervention.

Thus, from the very beginning of the armed struggle, there has been a bifurcation of interests among the different classes set into motion by the neoliberal economic reforms carried out by the Assad regime. The journalist Anand Gopal, speaking on a Syria panel at the 2013 Left Forum in New York, explained that the loss of control of local committees over the armed struggle was apparent at the very onset of the militarization of the upsurge. To fund a military brigade, you need money, and businessmen asserted their political primacy in the old fashioned way "by setting up their own militias.

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If one's goal is a more self-serving division of the spoils among elites, pragmatic alliances with foreign fighters sent by your economic allies in the Gulf States, those who are in turn allied with the imperialist U.S., is just business as usual. In addition, nothing creates the opportunity for material aggrandizement quite like the conquest of territory in the midst of war.

Those intrepid local activists struggling on the ground for justice for the tens of thousands killed by Assad, scraping to survive war-induced deprivation, working to develop democratic functioning, defending women's rights, creating solidarity economies, and dreaming of a society informed by humanitarian values, are thus faced with tremendous obstacles.

Today, some Syrian towns are controlled militarily and politically by reactionary Islamist forces. Others are controlled by those whose aim is booty or the theft of more seriously substantial economic resources. Without real influence over the conduct of the war that will determine who politically rules Syria, the possibilities open to the egalitarians will likely be very limited.

Those forces also seem to lack the kind of political instrument that will allow them to hold their own and then defeat the pro-imperialist bourgeois leadership of the Syrian opposition. Historically, that kind of contest has required a revolutionary working-class party. Only that kind of formation can defend the interests of those who began the rebellion in Syria against the intervention of local and regional elites, and U.S. imperialism.

Many radicalizing youth in the U.S. and Europe, shaken by the shift of the relationship of forces in the opposition from those who struggle for economic justice and democracy to those pragmatically allied with imperialism, the Gulf States, and foreign fighters associated with reactionary Islamist politics, wonder if they can escape the unsavory logic of the war and give their political support directly to the town councils organizing independently of the Syrian National Coalition and the leadership of the Free Syrian Army.

At a recent panel on Syria held at Yale University, featuring Vijay Prashad and Syrian-American intellectual Bassam Haddad, a student asked, "What if we want to escape the binary of the proxy war between the U.S. and Iran, or the U.S. and Russia, and just do direct solidarity with those trying to create collective structures on the ground?" Prashad answered, firmly, that while "solidarity is the most noble sentiment on earth," those experiments in social justice on the village level in Syria can only survive, ultimately, if "we take the imperialist boot off the neck of the nations of the Middle East."

The United National Antiwar Coalition has been attempting to build the kind of movement with the power to do just that. During the first two weeks of September, UNAC helped to call and coordinate over 100 protests to demand: No More War! End the U.S. War on Syria! These actions, while not large, were, in general, successful efforts to unify all the forces that were ready to march to oppose the U.S. missile strike on Syria. In most cases, speakers with many different points of view on the origin of the civil war in Syria came together respectfully to create events that could attract media attention and inspire those new to the movement to venture into the streets. This strategy—"one of unity in action around the principled demand of U.S. Out Now!"—is as critical to movement success as ever.

Recent polls show that an overwhelming majority in the United States is opposed to U.S. military intervention in Syria under any circumstances. War weariness and deep skepticism regarding U.S. war aims have been fueled in part by the extraordinary revelations of Edward Snowden. This presents a challenge to antiwar activists to find a way to close the gap between mass antiwar sentiment and the numbers ready to mobilize in protests.