

“Friends of Syria”—the Antechamber of a Wider Mideast War

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The so-called “Friends of Syria” conference convened in Istanbul last Sunday marks a major escalation in fomenting civil war and preparing for direct imperialist intervention. What is envisioned and is being actively prepared is a bloodletting that will eclipse the death toll thus far in the Syrian conflict and a war that has the potential of triggering a global conflict threatening millions.

Led by Washington and its principal NATO allies—Britain, France and Germany—together with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the reactionary Persian Gulf oil monarchies and Turkey, the conference produced two substantive developments.

The first is the announcement that Saudi Arabia, together with the regime in Qatar, is creating a \$100 million fund to place Syria’s “rebels” on their payroll. This formalizes the status of the armed groups known collectively as the Free Syrian Army as a mercenary force in the pay of the right-wing Gulf sheikdoms allied with US imperialism.

The second is Washington’s announcement that it has set up a fund to provide “humanitarian” assistance to Syria as well as “non-lethal” aid to the so-called rebels. This, US officials have revealed, is to include sophisticated satellite communications equipment as well as night-vision goggles.

While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that such gear would allow the armed opposition groups to “evade” attacks by Syrian security forces, the equipment will also enable them to conduct more effective terrorist attacks against both government targets and civilian populations perceived as supporting the government. It will also allow them to receive actionable intelligence from US military and intelligence, including from drones deployed over Syrian territory.

These actions came in the immediate wake of the announcement by United Nations Syria envoy and former secretary general Kofi Annan that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad had agreed to a six-point peace plan calling for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of the army from population centers, and a negotiated political settlement of the country’s year-old conflict.

The hiring and bribing by outside powers of Syrians to carry out armed attacks on government forces, together with the US provision of equipment designed to make these attacks more lethal, is clearly aimed at derailing any UN effort at achieving a so-called “soft landing” in Syria.

US imperialism and its allies are interested in one thing only: regime-change. All of the rhetoric about promoting “democracy” and “freedom” is cynical window-dressing for this strategic endeavor.

Washington’s posing, alongside the Saudi and Bahraini kings and the Qatari emir, as the liberator of the Syrian masses and champion of democracy is preposterous. These regimes, with US backing, deny elementary political freedoms to their own peoples and, in the case of Bahrain, the home of the US 5th Fleet, carried out the bloody suppression of a mass movement demanding democracy and equal rights.

Syria has been targeted for regime-change because it is allied with Iran and stands virtually alone in the region in not providing the US with bases or integrating itself into the Pentagon’s network of alliances, including NATO’s Mediterranean Alliance (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which includes the Persian Gulf monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

These strategic aims were clear in the US preparations for the Istanbul conference. Before arriving in Istanbul, Secretary of State Clinton flew to Saudi Arabia to secure Saudi guarantees of increased oil production to offset the global economic impact of US sanctions choking off Iranian exports, and to introduce Pentagon plans to place the oil sheikdoms under the protection of a US-supplied missile shield in preparation for war against Iran.

What is driving US policy toward Syria is a broader imperialist strategy to offset American capitalism’s economic decline by asserting US hegemony over a broad swathe of territory extending from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and encompassing the key energy producing regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Washington has waged two wars over the past decade to this end, in Afghanistan and Iraq, and is now preparing a third and far more dangerous attack on the country of 74 million people that lies between them, Iran. Such a war would have catastrophic implications not only for the Iranian people, but for the entire planet, prefiguring even more lethal confrontations between US imperialism on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other.

In addition to the substantive actions of providing cash and hardware to the Syrian “rebels,” the Istanbul conference recognized the Syrian National Council as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people. While it has been anointed as Washington’s agent, it is neither legitimate nor representative.

This fractious collection of political Islamists, aging exiles in the pay of Western intelligence agencies and former regime functionaries does not reflect the aspirations of the masses of Syrian working people. Millions of Syrian workers oppose the social inequality, repression and corruption that characterize the Assad regime, but they are hostile to imperialism and hostile to the sectarian policies of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Saudi sponsors.

These forces promise only intensified oppression, sectarian conflicts and the relegation of Syria to the status of a semi-colony.

The working class all over the world must oppose imperialist intervention and raise the demand, “Hands off Syria!” Settling accounts with the Assad regime is the task of the Syrian workers, not of predatory imperialist powers that are prepared to plunge the country into a sectarian bloodbath to further their plundering of the region’s oil wealth.

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