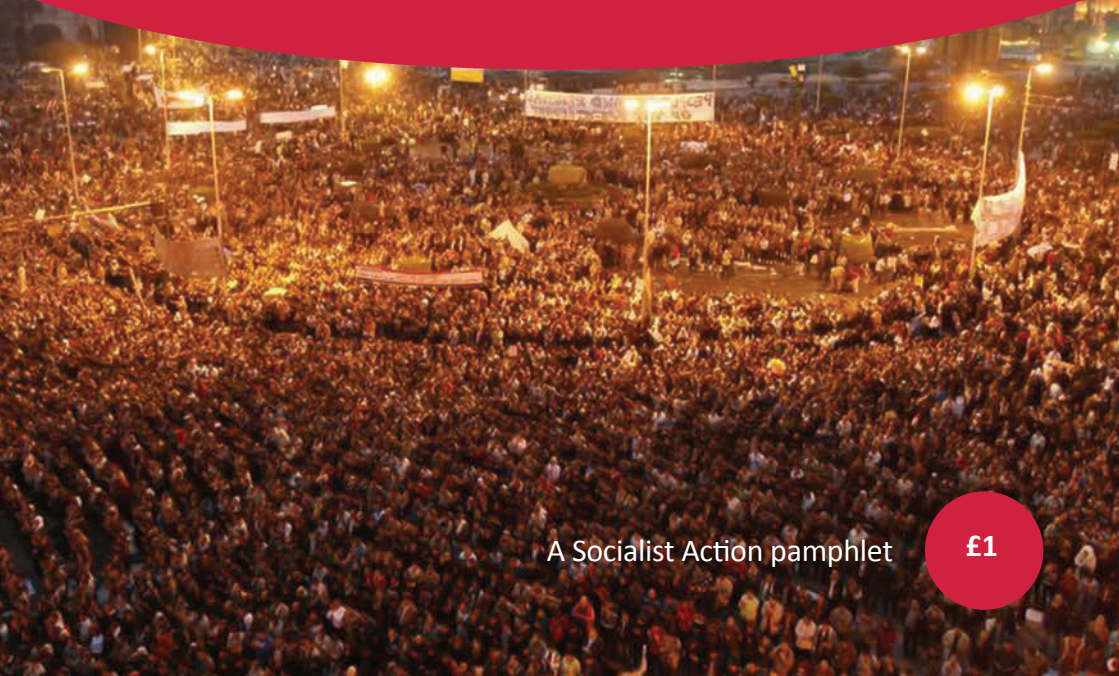




# Revolution and Counter-revolution in the Middle East



A Socialist Action pamphlet

£1

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## *Front cover photos:*

US Air Force B-2 Spirit stealth bomber taking part in attack on Libya, March 2011.  
Photo: Official U.S. Air Force.

Egyptians protest against President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo's Tahrir Square, February 2011.  
Photo: Mohamed Abed/AFP/Getty Images.

Egypt's military back in charge following July 2013 coup.  
Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy.

# Introduction

From the moment in January 2011 when the dictator Ben Ali in Tunisia became the first casualty of the Arab Spring, with mass uprisings threatening to sweep away one after another of the pro-U.S. dictatorships in the region, imperialism began to plan a determined counter-offensive.

Thrown on the defensive by the scale of the upsurge, the West was unable to organise itself rapidly enough to prevent the fall of Mubarak in Egypt. But it quickly rallied its resources and energised its tactics to prevent any breakthrough for the masses in Bahrain and Yemen, which were the other two countries to see the most determined and effective protests.



However, stopping any further advance was an insufficient goal for a region with the strategic importance of the Middle East. It did not accept for a minute the reverses it had suffered, and set about planning not only how to recoup the situation, but even turn it to its advantage.

The first step in this was to exploit contradictions within the forces engaged in the mass uprisings to win support for intervention against Gaddafi in Libya.

The forces of radical Sunni Islam – its Muslim Brotherhood mainstream variant and extremist Al Qaeda type currents – had mainly opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, ensuring the bulk of popular Islam globally opposed the war.

In Libya, seduced by their recent success into believing they would reap the rewards of an overthrow of Gaddafi, these currents supported the imperialist bombardment. The grotesque destruction of Libya by high-tech bombing, the wave of murderous racism that swept the country and the extra-judicial hounding of Gaddafi supporters raised scarcely a murmur of opposition.

Imperialism not only racked up a military victory, but also succeeded in dividing the political forces – both in the West and in the region – that had opposed its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many currents that had contributed to the unprecedented global response to the Iraq war either supported or did not oppose the intervention in Libya. Others became mired in the contradiction of opposing the intervention while calling for a victory for the imperialist-backed forces.

Emboldened by this success, the imperialists turned to attempting the same tactics in Syria while simultaneously plotting to overthrow the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.

The precise tactics were organised primarily by the US and its allies in the region, in particular Saudi Arabia, assisted by Qatar playing the role of ‘front man’, the other Gulf States, especially the UAE in relation to Egypt, and, of course, Israel.

On Syria, Qatar played a key role, having built up relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamist forces through providing a haven for some of their key spokespeople and the role of Al-Jazeera in exposing US atrocities in Iraq.

Qatar used this carefully accumulated influence to broker support for Western intervention in Libya. It then played the key role in successfully campaigning for sanctions on Syria, gaining imperialist support for the armed opposition and covertly arming it.

All talk of democracy and support for the aims of the Arab Spring from imperialism is nothing but populist cant and hypocrisy. Its only aim is to eliminate all resistance – however feeble – to its interests and those of its regional allies, primarily Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussain in Iraq had been a weak link that was successfully eliminated. Gaddafi another. The next target was the Syrian regime, which has historically supported the Palestinian resistance and Hezbollah and is allied to Iran, which is the ultimate target. As a senior Saudi official said: ‘The king [of Saudi Arabia] knows that other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.’

The aim of getting rid of Assad thus pre-dates the Arab Spring, but the uprisings in the region made this goal more urgent.

The emergence of demonstrations against Assad provided the opportunity. A wide range of democratic, secular and religious currents, whose predominant line was for negotiations to wrest democratic concessions from the regime, initially led the protests. But their voices were soon overcome by intransigent Saudi- and Qatari-backed groups calling for imperialist support to cast out Assad and which ‘radicalised’ the confrontation with the regime through terrorist acts and armed provocations.

International media campaigns deprecated any Syrian efforts at reform or negotiations. The call for negotiations was further marginalised by delegitimising the regime through suspension from the Arab League.

The democratic movement polarised for or against this strategy, those supporting it falling into the arms of imperialism’s regional goals.

Imperialism rapidly began giving strategic and material support – including arms via regional proxies – to the most intransigent currents in the opposition.

With the support of Turkey and the Saudis, the recognition of the ‘Syrian National Council’ (SNC) – controlled by exiles based outside the country – as ‘sole representative of the Syrian people’ was hurriedly orchestrated.

To Syria’s north, Turkey provided a base for the so-called ‘Free Syrian Army’. From the south-east, Gulf finances and arms passed across the border from Jordan.

Stepped-up sanctions aimed at eating away at the support for the regime.

However, imperialism met an unexpected and intransigent obstacle that thwarted its plans to step up its support for the opposition – the Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council.

This meant its support to the opposition had to remain covert and thus more limited. Most recently, its August 2013 attempt to get round the UN veto through unilateral action by the US supported by Britain and France also foundered when, in an unprecedented breach in the ‘special relationship’, the British Parliament refused to sanction it.

So for the moment its Syria plans are mired in the Russian initiative to put negotiations back on the table through brokering a deal on chemical weapons – and raising credible questions as to whether the regime had indeed been behind the Sarin gas attack in Damascus that occasioned the imperialist push for war.

At the same time as pursuing its war drive in Syria – in which the Muslim Brotherhood current is deeply implicated – the imperialists were busy plotting the overthrow of this same current from government in Egypt. This achieved its goal with the July 2013 military coup that ousted Morsi and brought the army back to power.

So nearly three years on from the outset of the Arab Spring, what is the balance sheet so far? The imperialists have reversed their fortunes in Egypt, overthrown a troublesome gad-fly in Libya, defeated the mass movements in Yemen and Bahrain, are in the process of replacing the elected Ennahda government in Tunisia with a technocratic appointed government, and although stalled, their offensive against Assad in Syria is far more advanced than it was in 2011.

Throughout these events Socialist Action has warned that the left should not be mesmerised by the scale of mobilisations and polarisations in the region, and should also carefully examine the goals, tactics, obfuscations and manoeuvres of imperialism within it.

Socialist Action was almost alone on the British left to see the threat in Libya before it took place, warning of a coming imperialist intervention. It implacably opposed the intervention and all those who supported it.



On Syria, Socialist Action was also alert to the plans of imperialism and saw with alarm its co-option of the armed opposition to Assad. We pointed to the covert arming of the opposition by imperialism, the role of Saudi and Qatar, and opposed the imperialist offensive against Assad – warning of the build-up to intervention – when much of the left maintained illusions that progressive and democratic forces still prevailed within the opposition.

Again on Egypt, from early 2013 Socialist Action warned of detailed coup preparations, including the way the opposition to Morsi was being manipulated to provide a cover for an army takeover. Socialist Action correctly described the army's June ultimatum to Morsi as an active counter-revolutionary coup threat. When the army acted bloodily against Morsi and his supporters we did not hesitate to condemn the coup, when sadly many others on the left continued to harbour illusions that the army was acting on behalf of the democratic aspirations of the 'people' even as the Muslim Brotherhood was being gunned down.

On each of these – Libya, Syria, Egypt – Socialist Action's analysis has been proved right, while much of the rest of the left has got many of the issues quite wrong.

Socialist Action arrived at a correct assessment because the analytical method it uses to arrive at a political line is that most clearly explained by Lenin in *Left-Wing Communism*: 'the Communist Party... must act on scientific principles. Science... demands that account must be taken of all the forces, groups, parties, classes and masses operating in a given country' (Lenin, V. I., 1920a, p.81).

In other words, in the unfolding of the Arab Spring, it is not just the level of mobilisation of the masses that must be considered, but the role within this of all class forces, particularly imperialism and its local agents.

The unfolding of the situation in the Middle East is far from over. The army will struggle to stabilise its rule in Egypt, as the popular masses do not in their majority support the return of the Mubarakists. The imperialists' offensive in Syria has been stalled, but is not ended. Palestine and Gaza remain a touch-paper for the region. Israel has not abandoned its expansionary agenda in the region nor its open threats to Iran.

This pamphlet is based on key articles by Socialist Action on Egypt, Syria and Libya, from 2011 to the 2013 coup in Egypt and the imperialists' setback on Syria, outlining how we approached these events as they unfolded.

The original articles and others that appeared over this period – and links to relevant sources – can be read in full at [www.socialistaction.net](http://www.socialistaction.net).

## Timeline of revolution and counter-revolution in the Middle East

### 2010

17 December – Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolation launches protest movement in Tunisia

### 2011

14 January – Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali flees to Saudi Arabia

25 January – Start of 19 days of protest across Egypt against Mubarak. Tahrir Square occupied

3 February – ‘Day of Rage’ in Yemen initiate weeks of protests against Saleh

11 February – Egyptian army forces Mubarak from power

14 February – Protesters occupy the Pearl roundabout in Manama, Bahrain launching ongoing protests

15 February – Violent protests start in Benghazi, eastern Libya

14 March – Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council forces enter Bahrain and suppress protests

15 March – Demonstration against Assad held in Syria

17 March – UN Security Council approves Libya ‘no-fly’ zone

19 March – Airstrikes against Libya begin

29 July – Founding of ‘Free Syrian Army’ announced

23 August – ‘Syrian National Council’ announced in Istanbul, Turkey

20 October – Gaddafi killed in Sirte, Libya

23 October – First free elections in Tunisia give 37% to EnNahda

12 November – Syria suspended from Arab League, sanctions imposed

23 November – Saudi Arabia forces Saleh to step down in Yemen, but he remains leader of General People’s Congress party

### 2012

21 February – Saleh’s deputy, Hadi, the sole candidate, wins 99.8% in Yemen presidential elections

30 June – Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood candidate, sworn in as elected President of Egypt

22 November – Morsi issues temporary decree to prevent the Mubarakite constitutional court dissolving the Egypt Constituent Assembly

24 November – Egyptian anti-Morsi National Salvation Front launched

8 December – Morsi rescinds temporary decree

15 and 22 December – Egyptian constitutional referendum takes place – 63.8% back proposed Constitution

### 2013

30 June – Day of demonstrations against Morsi called in Egypt on anniversary of his swearing in

1 July – Egyptian army issues 48-hour ultimatum of intention to impose its own ‘road map to peace’

3 July – Army coup in Egypt. Morsi arrested

21 August – Obama calls for airstrikes on Syria in response to ‘sarin gas attack’

24 August – British Parliament refuses to authorise airstrikes against Syria

10 September – Obama indefinitely postpones Congressional vote on Syria airstrikes

## Chapter One

# Egypt – telling a counter-revolution from a revolution

*Based on an article first published on 21 August 2013*

By Jane West

The unfolding counter-revolution in Egypt was an object lesson in the correctness of Lenin's insistence on the need to analyse each situation from the point of view of the interrelation of all classes and social layers.

Since the beginning of 2013 Socialist Action has warned that the military and Mubarakite forces in Egypt were preparing the conditions for a counter-revolutionary coup. This analysis has been proven correct in the bloody unfolding of events in Egypt.



*Bodies lie in a Cairo mosque following a massacre by the Egyptian Army.*

But, despite the evidence of deepening coup plans, regrettably most of the left in Britain believed that the unfolding events presaged a new step forward in a revolution. In other words, they were not able to tell a counter-revolution from a revolution.

This failure of analysis meant that even when the counter-revolutionary coup had actually taken place, it was initially denied.

Thus *Socialist Worker* on 9 July headlined its analysis 'Egypt – a second revolution sweeps out a president'. The day before, Counterfire wrote that 'The fall of Morsi wasn't a military coup, but the danger is that it will lead to one.'

Tragically the overthrow of Morsi was not a 'second revolution' but was indeed a 'military coup' that carried through a brutal and bloody counter-revolution – one that was carefully prepared for months and which adopted precise tactics to ensure its success.

It is obviously vital that those who attempt to provide political leadership in the class struggle can tell a counter-revolution from a revolution. Any method of analysis that does not allow this is fundamentally wrong. It is therefore necessary to



be clear about the real processes which took place in Egypt and the wrong method of analysis that led to these wrong judgements on the dynamic of events.

In the period leading to the coup, the fact of major demonstrations against Morsi was not enough to conclude that this meant a new phase of the Egyptian revolution was being launched – as much of the left believed. In order to judge these events it was necessary to first understand what class forces were encouraging and orchestrating these protests, who led and controlled them, and what their outcome would be.

A slogan ‘Down with Morsi’ can evidently unite a wide range of class forces that have entirely different reasons for their opposition and different proposals as to what should replace him. The question is which class forces are leading and controlling this process and where is it going?

It was crystal clear from the end of 2012 that a coalition of the Egyptian army and Mubarakists had moved from just obstructing the progress to democracy in the Egyptian state – dissolving the Parliament, resisting the replacement of Mubarakite judges and officials, putting off the elections – to preparing the ground for a complete counter-revolutionary coup. An article which appeared on Socialist Action’s website on 13 February this year explained the unfolding process. Its title was self-explanatory: ‘Israel, Saudi Arabia and US preparing a coup in Egypt’. The article started:

‘Imperialism and Israel have never reconciled themselves to the 2011 overthrow of their client Mubarakist regime in Egypt. Israel and the US perfectly understand that not only is Egypt the most populous Arab state but it is the decisive one from the point of view of any military confrontation with the Zionist state.

‘The Saudi Arabian dictatorship, concerned above all with its own survival, is terrified by any unrest in the Arab world and looks to the US and Israel as the only reliable pillars to support it.

‘None of them consider the moderate Muslim Brotherhood dominated presidency of Mohamed Morsi radical. But nothing other than the purest of client regimes in Egypt is acceptable to the US, Israel or Saudi Arabia. They are therefore determined to restore a Mubarakist regime, without the former dictator, in Egypt.’

The tactics of the coup plotters, aimed at preparing and providing a cover for this counter-revolution, included carefully integrating into their preparations pro-Western liberals and old-style Nasserite forces. These latter groups were useful in calling mobilisations against Morsi that hid the hand of the counter-revolutionary Mubarakists and their US, Saudi and Israeli backers.

Tragically, sections of the socialist left went along with this, putting opposition to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood’s variant of political Islam above the more

fundamental class line of divide with the forces of the previous regime and its army supporters. Left support for the anti-Morsi demonstration on 30th June, called by a coalition of the right, liberals, Salafists and Nasserites backed by the army, contributed to allowing the army to claim to act for the ‘real’ will of the Egyptian people.

## The Muslim Brotherhood

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood forces across the Middle East have had a thoroughly wrong orientation. Instead of taking the Arab uprisings as the basis for forging a new alliance of all those forces to some degree in conflict with imperialism and its puppet regimes – secular Arab nationalism, Hezbollah, Iran and the left – instead it made a bloc with imperialism against Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria.

This political orientation meant the Muslim Brotherhood allied with the very forces that were most determined to destroy it – and which are currently doing so both bloodily and brutally in Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood went beyond necessary tactical compromises to avoid a premature clash with the Egyptian army to instead put faith in the idea that if its subsidy from the US was guaranteed, the army could be relied on to stay out of politics.

On the basis of this erroneous belief, the Muslim Brotherhood set its face against building any internal coalition with the Nasserites and secular nationalists or indeed the left, and instead attempted to lead the ‘new Egypt’ on the basis of the support for political Islam alone.

It attempted to appease the US and Israel by taking no serious steps to end the blockade of Gaza.

This weakened the forces standing against imperialism across the Middle East, and it robbed the Brotherhood of the support of key forces in the region and in Egypt that would defend it when imperialism – as it inevitably would – turned on it. The Muslim Brotherhood made the disastrous mistake of seeing Assad in Syria, not the US and its puppets, as its fundamental enemy.

However, none of these disastrous errors and misjudgements, which allowed imperialism and its puppets to isolate it and undermine its political support, alter the fundamental class line of divide. It is the Egyptian army, its US backers, and its Israeli and Saudi supporters, that are the most fundamental enemy faced by the



*Muslim Brotherhood protest – marking 60 days of the coup.*

Egyptian people. The reinstatement of the army is far worse than Morsi, both for the struggle against imperialism (including in Gaza) and for the resulting repression of democratic debate and social struggle within Egypt.

The coup places in command those who organised a 30-year period of repression, summary executions, torture and terror that disfigured Egypt before the 2011 uprising. While the key target is the Muslim Brotherhood today, any serious opposition to the army from the Nasserites, liberals or the left will rapidly make them its targets too.

That is why it is a deep tragedy that large parts of the left in Egypt gave the counter-revolutionary coup plans a left cover by joining an unprincipled bloc against Morsi and uncritically supporting the demonstrations being co-ordinated between the army and Mubarakists to provide the excuse for his forcible ousting. In this way the disorientation of the left in Egypt aided the counter-revolution which is now unfolding.

### **The reason for these errors**

Two fundamental errors of politics lay behind the failure to correctly analyse the situation and therefore draw the class line where it rightly belonged.

First, and most straightforward, a large part of the left placed its opposition to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's variant of political Islam above the more fundamental division between the working class on the one hand and the imperialist-backed Egyptian army and Mubarakism on the other. That is, it formed a bloc with the Mubarakists against Morsi.

Whatever its wrong positions, the Muslim Brotherhood presidency was an advance over the previous Mubarakite regime. The repressive apparatus of the state was held in check compared to either the Mubarak period or what is unfolding now, and there were no mass arrests and killings on anything like the scale now being witnessed. Its claim to legitimacy rested on a democratic process that it was pledged to continue.

Socialists don't have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines, hankering for an illusory 'third camp' or citing 'neutrality' when the state launches a coup, rounds up opponents, massacres protesters and stages show trials. Even less should they be mobilising in a bloc with those who are preparing a counter-revolution.

Sadly even the reality of an actual counter-revolutionary coup and massacres of Muslim Brotherhood protesters did not penetrate some on the left. Some of the main currents of the socialist left in Egypt – and a few here – continue to explicitly endorse the coup. Or, shamefully, while claiming to be against military rule, they endorse the overthrow of Morsi and the method of achieving it.

This is as morally and politically bankrupt as saying to a thief that you condemn them for stealing but perhaps they should give the proceeds to you. And the

Egyptian army is even less likely to hand over power to the left in Egypt than the thief is likely to hand over their swag.

However, there is another fundamental error in the analytical method which meant the coup preparations were not identified, and the key element in these plans – the 30th June mobilisations – were falsely characterised as a ‘second phase of the revolution’.

To understand this error requires a return to Lenin.

Lenin insisted that the political line of the working class could not be based on an analysis of its own situation alone but must be based on an analysis of the relations between all classes and groups in society. As he put it in *Left-Wing Communism*: ‘the Communist Party... must act on scientific principles. Science... demands that account must be taken of all the forces, groups, parties, classes and masses operating in a given country’ (Lenin, V. I., 1920a, p.81). This is simply an application of the fundamental Marxist concept of the totality.

For Lenin, as a Marxist, the ‘subject’ of the revolutionary process (that which acted, that which needed to achieve class consciousness) was the working class. But Lenin pointed out that what the proletariat needed to understand and therefore to act upon – that is the ‘object’ – was not only itself but the interrelation of ‘all the forces, groups, parties, classes and masses’.

As opposed to this approach of Lenin – that a political line has to be based on analysis of the interrelation of all classes – many currents on the left have adopted a different philosophical approach – that the working class is indeed the ‘subject’ of the revolutionary process, but that to determine the correct line of action it needs to acquire the fullest knowledge not of ‘all the forces, groups, parties, classes and masses’ but only of itself. Instead of analysing the interrelation of all classes they analyse only the situation of the working class.

Put in crude terms it leads to the entirely non-Marxist and non-Leninist concept that ‘if there are a lot of people involved it must be progressive’. Those who want to understand this issue from a more fundamental point of view can read an article on the Socialist Action website, ‘Lenin versus the early Lukács’.

## **A counter-revolutionary coup**

In reality, those preparing the counter-revolution in Egypt well understood that, given the scale of mobilisation that had overthrown Mubarak and brought Morsi to power, they would themselves have to assemble a similarly large reactionary bloc – exploiting the wrong line of the Muslim Brotherhood to do so.

The steps in this were clear. Egypt’s economy was deliberately sabotaged. Relentless media campaigns against Morsi were waged. Attacks on Copt churches were carried out to sow sectarian divisions. Attempts to purge Mubarakite officials were presented as ‘attacks on democracy’.

The aim of this was to sew together a coalition of liberals, Salafists, Mubarakists, Nasserites and others to 'defend democracy' against Morsi. Leadership in this, of course, was held by the Mubarakite army, which far from 'defending democracy' had the intention of destroying both it and the mass movement.

The coup preparations were clear from early in the year. Key opposition players, El-Baradei and the pro-Western liberals, were entirely complicit. In March this year El-Baradei went to the UAE (where most of the Mubarakist leaders fled in 2011) and met with Crown Prince Bin Zayed and Shafiq – the Mubarakists' defeated candidate for President against Morsi. They agreed that the only route was an army coup against Morsi, which the exiled Mubarakists had been secretly organising for since 2012, and set about lobbying for Western support.

In Egypt, at secret meetings with the opposition, the Army agreed to topple Morsi if enough protesters could be got onto the streets to provide a cover for their actions.

The anti-Morsi petition by the previously little known Tamarod became the political vehicle to organise this mobilisation. The small founding group were backed by powerful business interests, getting free advertising on Egypt's most viewed TV channels and subsidised office space. Not just the liberal opposition channels but the full weight of the Mubarakist political machine was thrown behind collecting signatures.

The agitation around the petition created the push behind the mobilisation on 30 June, the key plank in the coup plan.

All this was plain to see for those examining not just the rebellious mood developing among the masses, but what political forces were driving this process, the central role of the Mubarakists, the complicity of the right-wing Arab states, and the role of the army. A full-scale counter-revolution was in progress, within which the participants in the mass demonstrations just had a walk-on part, not a leading role.

But for a left mesmerised by the sight of a large demonstration this was disregarded. Instead of seeing the looming counter-revolution, this left comforted itself with the mantra that 'revolution is a process'. But so is counter-revolution, and that is what the demonstrations were orchestrated to facilitate.

As Adam Shatz accurately put it in on his *LRB* blog: 'So this is how it ends: with the army killing more than 600 protesters, and injuring thousands of others, in the name of restoring order and defeating "terrorism". The victims are Muslim Brothers and other supporters of the deposed president Mohammed Morsi, but the ultimate target of the massacres of 14 August is civilian rule. Cairo, the capital of revolutionary hope two years ago, is now its burial ground.'

It is not surprising that the pro-Western liberals, Nasserites, the Emirs and Sheikhs of the Middle East, the Mubarakists and the rightist Islamists had illusions in or

promoted the ‘democratic’ credentials of the army and the state. This is deep in their political *raison d’être*.

What is more shocking is that sections of the socialist left were drawn into this trap and some have still not drawn the evident conclusions about the coup and its own dreadful misjudgement.

After the event – too late, as the counter-revolution has taken place – more correct views are emerging, with the bloody actions of the army at least noted or belatedly recognised as the return of the previous regime.

This is good. But Marxism is not about recognising events after they have occurred but is a means to understand a social dynamic as it is happening and therefore what attitude to take towards it. A political method that cannot distinguish a counter-revolution from a revolution as it is unfolding, and not merely when it is openly walking the streets, is totally wrong.

Socialist Action clearly explained step by step this year the preparation of a counter-revolution in Egypt, while those with a wrong method of analysis falsely believed this was a new stage in a revolution. Events have very tragically shown which of these two analyses was correct

Anyone who seriously wants to learn from such errors should reject the wrong methods of analysis that led to it and return to Lenin’s method of considering the interrelation of all classes and layers in society. This, not populism, is what leads to the accurate analysis of the situation. It is the approach Socialist Action took to judging the situation in Egypt and why its method of analysis was proved correct.

However, the most important question in relation to Egypt now is to do everything possible to attempt to safeguard the Egyptian masses from the consequences of the counter-revolution which is now unfolding. Drawing the general lessons of these events for future struggles should not stand in the way of unity with all those in solidarity with the Egyptian masses against the onslaught they face.



## Chapter Two: The coup in Egypt

# Israel, Saudi Arabia and US preparing a coup in Egypt

*Based on an article first published on 13 February 2013*

By Paul Roberts

Imperialism, Israel and their regional allies never reconciled themselves to the 2011 overthrow of their client Mubarakist regime in Egypt.

They are therefore determined to restore a Mubarakist regime, without the former dictator, in Egypt.

This is the background to the rising internal disorder. In January-February 2013, violent demonstrations in the main cities left more than sixty dead and thousands injured.

Rioting was widespread, the Presidential Palace in Cairo was assaulted with Molotov cocktails and guns were fired at a prison, police stations and court house in Port Said.

In a number of these cases Egypt's security forces, which are still dominated by supporters of Mubarakism, simply stood aside while armed protestors were allowed to rampage and create chaos. Three provinces, Port Said, Ismailia and Suez, were declared subject to a state of emergency.

The clear aim is to create conditions in which the army and security forces can carry out a coup claiming Egypt is descending into chaos and therefore they have no option but to step in to 'save the country'.



This goal is beginning to be made explicit. The Army has openly warned it may seize political control. Defence Minister and army chief, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, said ‘political strife is pushing the state to the brink of collapse.’

However, the army and other Mubarakist forces in the security services are not yet able to stage a coup. The opposition to it and corresponding support for Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood is still too strong.



Therefore they aim at deepening the chaos to create more favourable conditions for a coup.

The background is Egypt's steadily worsening economic situation and slide towards financial crisis. The country is running out of the foreign reserves needed for food and fuel imports. In early 2013 it was estimated they would barely cover three months of the existing inadequate level.

GDP growth has slowed from 7.2 per cent in 2008 to an estimated 1.5 per cent in 2012. Industrial output and employment continued falling in the second half of 2012. As a result Egypt's currency rapidly lost value, dropping nearly 10 per cent in the first month of 2013.

Egypt needs a significant inflow of funds to avoid a crisis. Loans from Qatar (\$2.5bn) and Turkey (\$2bn) provide some relief and Iran has offered a credit line.

But those with the greatest access to funds are deliberately holding back to increase the instability. Saudi Arabia has immense reserves from its oil revenues, it had a budget surplus of \$102bn in 2012. A fraction of this would halt the Egyptian crisis, but it is not on offer.

US assistance, part of an IMF loan package, is also held back. An IMF loan of \$4.8 billion, unblocking an additional \$9bn of funds, has been agreed, but not released. And, while this loan would give Egypt up-front funds, punitive conditions that have been imposed – tax hikes, fuel and food subsidy cuts – would alienate the population.

Without this financial support, the Muslim Brotherhood has no solution to the country's economic crisis. Any alternative means of solving the economic situation would require measures against significant capitalist interests. As the Brotherhood itself is allied to sections of Egyptian capital, it is not even considering such steps.

Therefore discontent is spreading. Since last autumn waves of protest have been escalating, following on from a summer strike wave. This will deepen as living standards continue to decline.

Despite this, so far Morsi has been able to rely on substantial popular support against the Mubarakists. His constitutional changes were endorsed – the referendum result was 63.8 per cent ‘for’ and 36.2 per cent ‘against’, on a turnout of 32.9 per cent – despite having been forced to retreat from his November 2012 constitutional decree against the Mubarakist judiciary.

But the political confusion fomented around his actions against the Mubarakists was exploited to create a new anti-Morsi alliance.

Mubarak-era minister Amr Moussa and the pro-Western liberal Mohamed El Baradei used the banner of ‘secularism’ to bring ‘left’ nationalist Hamdeen Sabahi into a ‘National Salvation Front’ to oppose Morsi.

Sabahi, who had come third in the first round of the Presidential elections, did not endorse Morsi against the Mubarakist Shafik in the final run-off. He claimed the choice between the Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak’s former prime minister Ahmed Shafik was between a ‘tyranny in the name of religion’ and ‘tyranny in the name of the state’.

ElBaradei summarised the situation in a February tweet: ‘violence & chaos will continue until Morsi & co. listen 2 ppl’s demands’.

Such calls are used by the Mubarak loyalists and the security forces to build up the case that the army will have to step in to ‘restore order’.

In these preparations for a coup Israel, Saudi Arabia and US are not only sure to be coordinating with the Mubarakists but helping guide their actions.

There are still formidable obstacles for imperialism in Egypt. The memory of the revolution, and of the craven and vile dictatorship of Mubarak is recent, the results of the referendum show forces opposed to Mubarakism still have a significant majority.

But there should be no illusions. Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia are attempting to prepare the conditions for a Mubarakist coup d’etat in Egypt.

The chief task of the left is to do everything possible to prevent this strategy being crowned by success.

# Egypt – a counter-revolutionary coup

*Based on an article first published on 4 July 2013*

By Paul Roberts

Yesterday Egypt's military, with the full backing of imperialism, carried out a coup d'état.

Former President Mohamed Morsi was deposed and taken into military custody along with his key officials, with arrest warrants issued for hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood leaders.

All potentially anti-coup media outlets were closed down by the Army with many staff arrested. Even Al Jazeera was taken off the air, its offices raided and staff detained.

Today the military has sworn in its new 'interim' President, the long-established Mubarakist judge Adli al-Mansour.

The coup has annulled the results of a presidential election, two parliamentary elections and two constitutional referendums – all held since Mubarak was toppled in 2011.

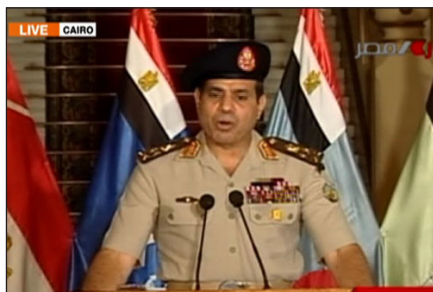
This has all been welcomed by a chorus of the imperialist states, many of whom were party to the coup's preparation, at the centre of which is the US, all determined to restore Mubarakist rule.

Despite this some on the left claim that Morsi's removal represents a second revolution or that the Army were forced to intervene to head off such a revolutionary advance. Such wishful thinking is pure and simply that, with no basis in reality.

A serious counter-revolutionary reverse has taken place and the Army is intent on driving through its gains. The situation for Egypt's left has not improved, but dramatically worsened.

It is not the size of the mass mobilisations that determines the character of the struggle that has been taking place but the alignment of social forces.

Both sets of mobilisations, these past few days and those in January and February 2011, were huge and brought millions on to the streets. But the fundamental character of the struggles they engaged in were diametrically opposed.



*General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, head of the armed forces, announces the overthrow of Egyptian President Morsi.*

## The 2011 revolutionary advance

Two years ago the mass movement was struggling to overthrow Mubarak's military regime – a revolutionary act. This week's mobilisations were directly allied to the Mubarakist forces – explicitly calling for the Army to retake power – a counter-revolution.

The opposing fundamental character to these two struggles is why the Egyptian state's security apparatuses dealt with them so differently, brutally repressing the protests in 2011 but supporting them this week.

The 18-day 2011 upsurge had to withstand immense state repression; curfews and protesters tear-gassed, shot, beaten and stoned – over 800 were killed and 6,000 injured. Despite such brutality the generals could not break the 2011 mobilisations. More than 90 police stations were destroyed and the demonstrations continued to grow, so the military sacrificed Mubarak to try to retain its hold.

Wave after wave of revolutionary mobilisation forced the hand of the Mubarakist state apparatus which conceded on elections and other democratic gains. Then their candidate for President was defeated despite Mubarakist manipulation of the elections.

## The 2013 counter-revolutionary reverse

This week's four days of anti-Morsi protests have had the opposite character. Irrespective of the different views held by the wide range of political forces that mobilised, the dynamic of their struggle has been dominated by the most powerful component in their alliance – the Mubarakist military. This was to replace the Muslim Brotherhood government with a Mubarakist one.

As a result, the security forces openly backed the protests, actively encouraged people to participate and the police even provided refreshments in Tahrir Square.

The military's repression has all been focused on Morsi's supporters. The army, security service and their hired agents have attacked and broken up their rallies and destroyed Muslim Brotherhood offices.

The army, Mubarakist forces and their imperialist allies have carefully orchestrated the political struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood, bringing together an alliance that included pro-western liberals, pro-military nationalists, pro-Saudi Islamists and confused left currents.



*Egyptian army rounds up Muslim Brotherhood supporters.*

Alongside this it has coordinated with the main external actors – the US and its agencies the IMF and World Bank, Israel and Saudi Arabia – to cut off the external funding to the embattled regime, deepening an economic crisis already developing as a result of deteriorating world trade, declining cotton prices and exacerbated by the effects of unrest on the tourist trade.

With GDP growth falling from 7.1% in 2007 to 2.2% in the first quarter this year Egypt's finances became so squeezed it could no longer maintain the levels of food and fuel purchases from abroad. Shortages of necessities have been on the increase.

Youth have been particularly badly hit by the deteriorating economy with unemployment of the under-30s currently running at 75 per cent.

At the same time, the Mubarakist state apparatus – which Morsi was blocked from acting against at the end of last year – increased social chaos by deliberately reducing the policing of crime, allowing robbery and murder rates to soar. This has increased insecurity particularly among middle layers in society that were already less favourable to the Muslim Brotherhood and encouraged a more militant opposition.

The strategy was to use the rising economic hardship and social insecurity as a battering ram against Morsi's Presidency and create a level of civil unrest that provided grounds for the army to intervene.

When the generals had made a coup attempt in 2012 before the Presidential election – dissolving Parliament and assuming its legislative powers – there was no mobilisation in support, forcing them to back down and accept Morsi's election.

This time the circumstances were better prepared, and the mass movement they had helped create called on the army to intervene.

The Army did not act because they feared a revolution, as some have optimistically claimed. The Army and Mubarakist representatives of imperialist interests in the country have been actively fomenting the economic circumstances for the popular protests, and forging their political leadership. The mass movement was unleashed on 30th June precisely to create the excuse for a coup.

The advance preparation is the only explanation for the totally tight choreography of all the actions and statements of the country's police, internal security and intelligence forces with the Army.

While the mass movement undoubtedly reflects the hardship being experienced by the poorest and most down-trodden of the Egyptian masses, it is not enough to analyse why the masses are discontented. In order to understand the political dynamics of the situation it is vital to understand the situation in all classes in society, including the role of imperialism itself.



## Mubarakism – imperialism's key regional ally

First of all, it should be crystal clear that whatever its careful media comments and official statements, the whole course of events has been closely coordinated with the US.

Egypt has been vital to the US's regional interests since the 1979 peace treaty with Israel following the Camp David accords. Since then Egypt's officer corps has been trained by the US, collaborates closely with the Pentagon and receives \$1.3bn annual US military aid.

Since the revolt in 2011, the US had only one goal – to restore a purely vassal Mubarakist regime. Its regional interests can only be fully met by a totally pliant Egyptian state. It requires Egypt to actively assist it to militarily dominate the region, to support Israel and act as a roadblock to the Palestinian struggle.

It was completely insufficient for the US that Morsi would not abrogate Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel. The assistance (even though it was limited) given to the Hamas government of Gaza, the increasing rapprochement with Iran and developing links with China made Morsi completely unacceptable to the US.

From the partial coup in June 2012, the refusal to cede control of any section of the Mubarakist state, the cutting off of sources of external economic aid, the creation of an 'anti-Morsi' political front dominated by the right, the retreat of the police from fighting crime, and the encouragement of the June 30th mobilisations, the Egyptian pro-imperialist bourgeoisie, the Army, the state and the imperialists have been in cahoots to create the circumstances for the ousting of Morsi.

The aim is the restoration of a reliable Mubarakist regime in Egypt. As direct Army rule would cause too much destabilising questioning of legitimacy, this is likely to take the course of the calling of Presidential elections from which the Brotherhood and other Islamist forces are excluded, by bans and repression of the independent media.

We can be quite confident that these elections, unlike last year's, will be rigged to ensure the election of the candidate of choice, who will be a hardline Mubarakite – by a margin they are likely to have already decided upon.

Illusions that this process may lead to a non-Islamist liberal alternative are just that.

The mobilisations of course illustrate the immense discontent that had built up. Even taking into account the destabilisation campaign, Morsi's government failed to take steps, for example on Palestine, that could galvanise support.

Support for imperialism's offensive against the Syrian government helped isolate it from others in the region resisting imperialist intervention. In accepting the sectarian, Sunni versus Shia, agenda promoted by the US and Saudi Arabia it

assisted the undermining of Arab unity, emboldening imperialism to simultaneously target Arab regimes on both sides of the sectarian divide.

Many will have joined the anti-Morsi protest in Egypt in the hope that removing him will get the economic problems sorted. But the Mubarakists no more have a solution for Egypt's economic crisis than the Muslim Brotherhood. They will introduce draconian austerity measures and, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, brutally repress those that fight such policies.

There should be no illusions as to what Mubarakism entails. It has already ruled Egypt for 30 years with a brutal iron fist – trade unions and strikes outlawed, protest illegal, political activists detained and tortured. Egypt was the country where the US 'rendered' most prisoners for torture and interrogation.

Egypt's military coup was a significant gain for imperialism's offensive in the Middle East. The principal democratic gains, achieved by immense struggle in 2011, have mostly been overturned. The conditions for the class struggle in Egypt will be more difficult.

Progressive people across the world should continue to give that struggle their support.



*Anti coup protest, Cairo, September 2013.*

## Chapter Three: Libya

# Libya: Never trust or rely on the imperialists

*Based on an article first published on 27 March 2011*

By David Fennell

The events in Libya reveal the hypocrisy and lies in the British, US and French governments' claims as to why they launched their military campaign.

They said it was to protect civilians – instead their bombing raids are killing civilians. Worse, they are using weapons which should be outlawed, such as depleted uranium. Anyone who wants to know what that means for the future of Libyans need only read the accounts of the horrifying birth defects in Fallujah, Iraq, after the US used similar weapons.



*US launches Tomahawk missile at Libya  
Photo: Charles McCain.*

And, of course, there was no action by the US, Britain or France to 'protect civilians' during the Israeli air assault on Gaza. Nor to 'protect civilians' against the massacre by the pro-Western dictator Saleh in Yemen. Nor, naturally, any condemnation of the Saudi intervention in Bahrain. Nor was there any US demand for Egypt's Mubarak to go in the way it called for Gaddafi to depart.

The only coherent explanation for the imperialists' actions in the Middle East is they support those which meekly give access to oil and which support the murderous Israeli state, which is the key guarantor of the US, Britain and France's domination of Middle East oil.

The other lie was that they were only intervening to enforce a 'no fly zone'. The accounts of how NATO airstrikes were used to lead the assault on Ajdabiya expose that.

As the BBC reported: 'Libyan rebels backed by allied air raids say they have seized control of the frontline oil town of Ajdabiya from Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's forces... Saturday's breakthrough came after a seventh night of bombardment by allies enforcing a UN-mandated no-fly zone. There were a series of massive coalition air strikes around Ajdabiya overnight, targeting Gaddafi forces.'

The present alignment of forces in Libya is clear. Whatever the original intention of the Libyan rebels, they have become entirely dependent on an alliance of imperialist military powers and the most reactionary Arab regimes such as the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. In this situation, any victory by them in the military struggle in Libya could only produce a Libya entirely subordinate to foreign imperialists.



*NATO bombing Libya. Photo: teleSUR.*

It is for this reason that Gaddafi, despite the brutal character of his dictatorship, has succeeded in creating a certain level of real social mobilisation – which is the only explanation of the scale of military resistance that is being shown against overwhelming imperialist air power.

The character of Gaddafi's dictatorship led many in the Middle East to support the initial movement of the rebels against him. But an understanding of the real relation of social forces is now beginning to dawn on some. For example, Egypt's *Socialist Renewal Current* clarified its views.

'On the other hand, we all know that the colonial powers which are attacking Gaddafi are waging their war for purely selfish calculations. These states are the same ones who supported Gaddafi and relied on him a short while ago. We have also to recognize that the Western intervention is aimed at tightening the imperialist control on the Libyan oil and strengthening Western presence in a region which is experiencing revolutions that represent a serious threat to Western interests. In light of this situation, the Libyan revolution is facing the risk of changing from a war against a repressive regime to a war between the forces backed by imperialism and the forces hostile to it.'

The only point to make regarding this analysis is that it is clear that there is not a 'risk' of the war becoming one between 'the forces backed by imperialism and the forces hostile to it.' It has already become so.

But the threat of this imperialist action goes further than just Libya. The establishment of a pure client in Libya would be used directly against progress in the country's neighbours which have just undergone revolutions – Egypt and Tunisia. Successful imperialist intervention in Libya will also be used as a precedent, and a lever, for future assaults on Hezbollah, Hamas and other Arab revolutionary movements.

The difference between a regime such as Gaddafi's and the imperialists is simple. Gaddafi is a local gangster who, in world terms, controls few blocks of a city. The

imperialists' crimes are by comparison like those of a mafia boss such as Al Capone. Gaddafi could never even approach the crimes the imperialists are capable of – killing two million in Vietnam, many hundreds of thousands at a minimum in Iraq, dropping atomic bombs on Japan. No good will ever come of inviting Al Capone in to deal with a local gangster.

The unfolding of the events in Libya shows one of the most fundamental of all rules in politics. Never trust and never rely on the imperialists. It is to be hoped that those in the Middle East, and everywhere, who initially had illusions in the imperialist intervention in Libya will not have to pay too bitter a price to learn this lesson.



## Chapter Four: Syria

# No imperialist intervention in Syria

*Based on an article first published on 11 October 2011*

By Jane West

As the intervention in Libya moves into its endgame, the West's attention is moving on to Syria.

The imperialists have so far drawn back from openly threatening military intervention, but only because a number of factors temporarily stay their hand.

An intervention in Syria is a much more substantial task than Libya – Syria's population of 21 million compared to Libya's 6 million is one measure of that. At the same time, the army and other armed forces appear to remain overwhelmingly loyal to the regime. There have been reports of some desertions, but no suggestion of whole units or sections going over to the opposition. This is unlike Libya where in the east of the country the entire state apparatus abandoned Gaddafi.



*Rally in support of Syrian government in Damascus, January 2013.*

This means an intervention would face both stronger military resistance and weaker opposition support. Air-strikes alone are unlikely to be sufficient, but deploying ground troops would lead to big opposition at home. The alternative of Turkey or other neighbours taking it on has its own problems, including whether imperialism wants Turkey in such a leading role.

This will not prevent intervention, but is enough to provoke caution. Therefore the next steps are sanctions to weaken the regime, alongside measures to bolster the opposition forces.

To this end, imperialism brokered the establishment of the Syrian National Council. But given the difficulties of traveling from Syria, and the fragmented character of the opposition, its claim that the founding meeting in Istanbul was representative of Syria's opposition groups is questionable. The meeting established a council of 140, of whom 40% were not based in Syria.



The purpose is clear. It provides a ‘government in exile’, which can confer legitimacy on any action against Syria, and a core for a compliant replacement government after any overthrow of Assad.

The SNC will be ‘benefitting’ from Western ‘advisors’ and other types of ‘support’ to help it ‘prepare for government’ in Syria – including advice on which Western companies should be brought in to run its significant oil, gas and mineral industry and take over its nationalised banks!

It is no surprise that the similarly unelected NATO-sponsored Libyan National Transition Council was the first to recognise the SNC as the legitimate government of Syria, while the EU and US have so far only ‘welcomed’ it.

Sections of the Syrian opposition have already begun to call for a ‘no fly zone’ or other intervention against Assad.

Fidel Castro, who was prescient on Libya, warning that NATO was preparing an intervention before anyone else realised this was on the agenda, has raised imperialism’s covert plans and the likelihood of an attack on Syria.

Cuba, alongside other Latin American countries, has opposed the attempts to get the UN to endorse such an attack.

Hugo Chávez in a statement to the UN on 21 Sept 2011 said: ‘It is intolerable that the powerful of this world intend to claim for themselves the right to order legitimate and sovereign governments to step down. This was the case in Libya, and they want to do the same in Syria.’

On Sunday 9 Oct 2011 a delegation from the ALBA block of Latin American countries led by Cuban and Venezuelan Foreign Ministers Bruno Rodriguez and Nicolas Maduro and including Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia visited Damascus. Maduro described its aim as to ‘reject invasion and political destabilisation attempts of the country by the United States and its allies’.

Imperialism is emboldened by the success of its intervention in Libya. The momentum of the Arab Spring appears to have been stalled by a combination of political confusion on the role of imperialist intervention, the agency of Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Bahrain, and the fomenting of sectarianism in Egypt. While imperialism has in no sense recovered its position, it is seeking to drive home an advantage and use the current confused situation to bring a client regime to power in Syria.

Imperialism cannot achieve this without the use of military intervention and economic coercion. The entire progressive movement world-wide should unite against any form of imperialist intervention in Syria, however it is presented and whatever form it takes.

# Reasons for the imperialist offensive against Syria

*Based on an article first published on 20 February 2012*

By Andrew Williams

The UN General Assembly motion on Syria agreed last week (16 Feb 2012), calling for Assad to step down, was organised by the US and its closest allies to legitimise their growing intervention in Syria. They were forced to by-pass the Security Council and go to the General Assembly because of Russian and Chinese vetoes on any attacks on Syria.

The US, Saudi Arabia and Israel are proceeding with their plans to intensify the military conflict against Syria by non-UN routes. The Arab League is calling for a joint UN-Arab ‘peacekeeping force’ – essentially a proposal to insert foreign military forces in to Syria – while the US has started flying its drones into Syrian airspace.



The ultimate aim of imperialism in the Middle East is to eliminate all resistance – however vacillating and weak – to its interests across the region. Saddam Hussein was overthrown in Iraq and Gaddafi was toppled in Libya. If the Syrian government, which is not always compliant to imperialism’s interests, can be replaced with a more reliable regime then further pressure can be focused on Hezbollah, which defeated Israel in Lebanon, and against Iran.

An attack on Syria has been the explicit policy of the US administration since 2001. This was confirmed by US General Wesley Clark, who commanded NATO’s 1999 assault on Serbia, who said that George W Bush’s White House ordered the military to prepare for invasion and takeover of eight countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran.

Afghanistan was invaded in 2001 but, aside from Britain, the other imperialists only gave token assistance to the US military action. When the US and Britain invaded Iraq in 2003, France and Germany, in alliance with Russia, even vetoed UN endorsement of the attack. This stalled Bush’s plans to move on to invade Syria, as without UN support it was over-stretched by these two conflicts.

However, toppling Assad remained on the US agenda. To this end the US worked alongside France and Britain to court and support Syrian opposition currents. As classified material revealed by WikiLeaks indicates, by 2006 the US was already funding Syrian opposition groups.

In parallel the imperialists started a new sanctions campaign. From 2003 the US, EU, Japan and Canada participated in increasingly tight economic sanctions, aimed at reducing the supply of Western products and services to Syria and blocking access to export markets for its petroleum products.



*US drones fly over Syria.  
Photo: james\_gordon\_los\_angeles*

This momentum against Syria was then slowed as other problems emerged for the US – left regimes in Latin America, instability in Africa, and the increasing weight of China in Asia, all exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis.

Nonetheless, when confronted with the 2011 rise of popular movements across the Middle East, a determined counter-offensive had to be launched. Urged on by its closest Arab ally, the Saudi Arabian dictatorship, plans to topple ‘non-compliant’ governments in Libya, Syria and Iran shot back up the agenda.

When Assad has stood up to imperialism, such as opposing the invasion of Iraq, supporting the Palestinian resistance, or refusing a peace treaty with Israel without the return of the Golan Heights, this has been very popular within Syria.

Therefore US and Israel support for the Syrian opposition at present is relatively discreet.

This is not stopping the West building up support for the SNC as the ‘regime-in-waiting’ and orchestrating a terrorist campaign in Syria. But with imperialism concerned to mask its role in the conflict, its local clients are being pushed to the fore.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are credited with marshalling the support of the Arab League, and Turkey is hosting the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Covert warfare is sustained from military bases in Turkey and Jordan, with supplies of arms and munitions being routed via Lebanon for actions in Homs, Hama and Damascus.

The US has considerable experience of this type of covert action, which has much in common with the US sustained ‘Contra’ war on Nicaragua in the 1980s.

By May 2011 the US was reported to be arming and training Syrian opposition groups from a US base in Turkey near the border with Syria. By December the US had established a second training camp for armed groups in Jordan.

By the beginning of 2012 British military and MI6 involvement in Syria was also reported in the UK and international media.

The next steps in ‘regime change’ are openly debated. For example the *Financial Times* argued for arming the FSA, splitting the army on sectarian lines (i.e. against Syria’s Alawite minority), followed up by ‘aerial bombardment’ and invasion to establish a so-called ‘safe haven’. The *Economist* argued that ‘Turkey, with the blessing of NATO and the Arab League, should create and defend a safe haven in north-western Syria. The FSA can train fighters there, and a credible opposition can take shape...’



*Syrians protest against US intervention in Syria.*

The agenda is clear. As *Bloomberg Businessweek* put it: ‘Toppling the Assad regime would deny Iran its most important regional ally and... break Iran’s ‘Shiite crescent’ of influence that extends through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and into the Palestinian territories’.

Syria is the principle supply route to Hezbollah in Lebanon – Israel’s most successful military opponent. It is a key supplier of aid to the Palestinian resistance movements.

Success against Assad would change the balance of forces in the region. It would cut off Hezbollah in Lebanon and isolate Iran.

That is why imperialism is ramping up its drive to war.

# US prepares its war against Syria

*Based on an article first published on 6 September 2013*

**By Paul Roberts**

In August 2013 the US military prepared for an immense assault on Syria.

A colossal war machine was readied; aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines, air force bombers, artillery and munitions were marshalled around Syria's borders. Twice as many warships were in the eastern Mediterranean than were deployed when Libya was assaulted. Hundreds of cruise missiles were ready to fire. Israel and the US tested their missile systems off Syria's coast.



*Preparations to attack Syria – US guided missile destroyers. Photo: US Navy.*

Imperialism's military assaults in the Middle East are not remotely battles between equals. For example US military spending is 305 times that of Syria, and France spends 26 times as much. (Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2013 Yearbook.)

The excuse for this escalation was the claim Assad had carried out a sarin gas attack. This was just an excuse, but we should note some facts and learn from the past.

First, the source of US's 'evidence' of the alleged attack are the very same intelligence agencies (Israeli and Saudi) that are determinedly campaigning for war.

Second, US Secretary of State John Kerry's presentations on Syria's 'chemical weapons' were less robust than those of his predecessor Colin Powell on Iraq's alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' which was the US/British pretext for that war.

In 2003 Powell infamously played tapes of 'intercepted Iraqi communications' to bolster the WMD story. But, as we now know, the whole story was entirely fake and no such weapons existed.

Kerry's evidence this time was the strangely similar 'Syrian communications intercepts' – but he didn't play the tapes!

Third, all alternative explanations or questions over the reliability of the evidence were denied air-time or drowned out by the noisy chorus repeating the allegation against Assad. For example, credible witnesses attributing the attack to Saudi-armed oppositionists were simply ignored, while the US's claims that the opposition did not

have sarin gas was repeated as fact, despite at least one group known to be active in Syria – the Al-Nusra front – having been caught in Turkey with 2kg of sarin.

Fourth, it made no sense for Assad to have used chemical weapons at that time. He was winning the war anyway and he knew the US was seeking an excuse to attack.

However, whether it is true or not, using chemical weapons as a pretext for war is sheer hypocrisy. The US, Britain and Israel, along with the governments supplied by them, have been extensive users of chemicals. In the last 50 years hundreds of thousands have been killed and maimed due to US use of Agent Orange, white phosphorus and depleted uranium. Israel and the US still use them in the Middle East.

However, despite this careful preparation of a *casus belli* and its huge military build-up, US imperialism still hesitated to attack Syria without the support of key allies.

Doubts existed about the effectiveness of air-strikes against Syria, with the military top-brass warning it would not be possible to overthrow Assad without a full-on interventionist war.

They argue that, without a Western presence, the fall of Assad would just strengthen Al Qaeda-type forces. In evidence, they point to Libya since the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, which remains overrun by competing militias, many allied to Al Qaeda. Last year's killing of the US Ambassador and staff in Benghazi was an indication of the problems.

Right on the brink of war against Syria, US Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said that air-strikes might 'inadvertently empower extremists or unleash the very chemical weapons we seek to control'.

Britain's chief of the defence staff, General Sir Nick Houghton, also voiced misgivings, as did General Lord Dannatt, the former head of the British army.

Nonetheless, the British government planned to join the US air-strikes, until its dramatic defeat in parliament. Cameron's coalition majority of 84 disintegrated as 30 Tories and 8 Lib Dems voted against while an additional 34 Tories and 12 Lib Dems abstained or were absent from 29 August's vote on support for possible military action. It fell by 272 to 285.



*By a margin of 13, British House of Commons rejects government's motion to authorise military action against Syria, 29 August 2013.*



Unlike previous votes on war, Labour did not back the government.

Cameron was forced to announce that Britain would not participate in the bombing, which the US had probably planned for the following weekend.

The anti-war movement in Britain, led by the Stop the War Coalition, greatly contributed to this. All those who helped build this movement for the last 10-plus years played a role in the fact that, for the first time in a century, the UK parliament rejected a major US foreign policy.



For Britain this was a new and profound marker in its long imperial decline. It was also a blow to the credibility of Hague and a Tory-led government that had spent two years leading the international campaign for military action against Syria.

It meant that, of the US's European allies, only France agreed to join the air-strikes. Both Germany and Italy, while offering assistance, declined to take part.

With warning voices at home and deprived of international support, Obama felt forced to delay action and seek Congressional authorisation to shore up the case for war.

This unexpected defeat for the US's war drive reflected the fact that continuous US wars since 2001, especially the illegal Iraq war of 2003, have created mass hostility across the imperialist countries. A consistent majority in the US, France and Britain opposed air-strikes on Syria.

It also reflects the increasing problems for a declining US in achieving all its global goals.

Since 2011 the US has adopted the aim of reorienting its diplomatic and military resources to the Asia Pacific region, in what it calls the 'pivot', to deal with the perceived threat from China. China's rapid growth points to it overtaking the US in size within 5 to 10 years. Its industrial production is already 20 per cent greater than the US.

This poses a severe threat to US global hegemony. Shifting resources to deal with it means the US wants to scale down, not step up, its military engagement in the Middle East.

This tangles the US in a contradiction. On the one hand, it wants to shift its attention to China and the Pacific, reducing its deployments in the Middle East and Central Asia. On the other, its economic decline and weakening influence mean it is repeatedly forced to resort to military means to maintain its global authority.



Squaring this circle means avoiding costly occupations like Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which commit tens of thousands of US troops, and instead looking to Libya or Serbia-style time-limited air campaigns, coupled with pressure on its European allies to take more of the military strain in the Middle East.

This had prevented earlier intervention in Syria. But the pressure for action built up relentlessly as the covert military operations failed to prevent the opposition suffering a string of reversals.

The coup in Egypt further stepped up the need for a quick solution in Syria. It well knows it may face difficulties consolidating the Mubarakists' return to power. They do not have majority support in society and the alliance that backed the coup is already fraying at the edges.

The coup put war plans into fast-forward. In July the US installed a new war operations centre in Jordan, then in August it launched the public campaign for immediate war, linked to the gas attack allegations.

But the blow from the British Parliament was an entirely unexpected brake on this helter-skelter to war.

Then, to add to the US's woes, Egypt's coup government united with Iraq and Lebanon to block Arab League support for a US bombing campaign unendorsed by the UN. Egypt's army is more worried about holding back radical Islamic currents than Assad.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon repeatedly said that the use of force is only legal when it is in self-defence or with UN Security Council authorisation, ruling out UN cover for action without a formal motion.

The US was rapidly in full-scale retreat. International isolation coupled with domestic caution was driven home by a Russian diplomatic coup proposing Syrian surrender of chemical weapons – meaning Obama faced defeat in Congress.

For an American President to be faced down on an issue of war would be unprecedented, weakening not just Obama personally but the White House's entire global authority. There was no choice but to sidestep – although the US and Obama have suffered a severe loss of face.

This marks a shift in the international relation of forces against imperialism, which it will now look for every opportunity to reverse, whether in Syria or elsewhere.

The events proved a great clarification for most of those on the left who for the last two years have backed the Syrian opposition. Faced with the reality of a planned US bombing campaign, most rapidly came out against it. But confusion on the real issues at stake in Syria remains.

The alliance of the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia with the Syrian opposition has been and remains an objectively counter-revolutionary bloc. While the Assad regime is far from progressive, this bloc remains a more reactionary alternative. The choice in the current struggle is not between Assad and socialism, or steps towards it. If the imperialist-organised bloc succeeds in overthrowing Assad, not only the population of Syria, but the whole Middle East, would be set back. Hezbollah would lose access to weapons needed to defend Lebanon from Israel. Hamas would be further isolated and Iran would lose its principal regional ally.



*After calling off the planned missile attack, US President Obama meets with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to discuss Syria and Iran, September 2013.*

The US and its allies have for two years blocked all efforts at negotiations to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, while covertly feeding in fighters and arms across the borders. The call for no preconditions on peace negotiations remains central.

The US has been blocked for the time being, but all those who oppose this war, which will include wide ranging views on the situation in Syria and the Middle East, need to remain mobilised.

In Britain all progressive people can play a role by supporting the activities of the Stop the War Coalition and CND.

