

Syrian War Enters Sixth Year with Graver Dangers Still Ahead

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This week marks the fifth anniversary of the war in Syria that has claimed well over a quarter of a million lives, and, between turning nearly five million into refugees and internally displacing another seven million, has driven more than half the country's population from their homes.

The national economy has been shattered, with over half of Syrians unemployed and 85 percent living in poverty. Much of the country has been plunged into darkness after continuous attacks on power stations and other electricity infrastructure.

Perhaps most staggering of all, the unrelenting violence combined with the destruction of the country's health care system and other social infrastructure as well as the plummeting of living standards has driven down life expectancy in Syria from 70.5 years in 2011 to just 55.4 years in 2015.

The rape of Syria, alongside the decimation of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, constitutes one of the great crimes of imperialism in the 21st century. What is commonly referred to by the media as the Syrian civil war or "uprising" has in fact constituted a massive "regime-change" operation carried out by Washington and its regional allies with complete contempt for the lives and well-being of the Syrian people.

This proxy war has been waged almost entirely by Al Qaeda-linked militias armed and funded by the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, which all collaborated to funnel in tens of thousands of so-called foreign fighters.

The attempts to sell this war to the American people, as a "humanitarian" intervention by the Obama administration and its media accomplices, and even—by various pseudo-left organizations—to portray it as a "revolution" have fallen totally flat.

As the anniversary fell this week, the level of fighting had diminished significantly under a "cessation of hostilities agreement" brokered by Washington and Moscow. The United Nations has brought together representatives of the Syrian government together with the collection of Islamist fanatics and foreign intelligence assets united in the Riyadh opposition in a third attempt to negotiate a cease-fire and "political transition."

Meanwhile, the government of Vladimir Putin announced on Monday that it was withdrawing the majority of its military forces from Syria, while maintaining its naval facility in Tartus and its air base in the western province of Latakia.

In less than six months, the Russian intervention enabled Syrian government troops to

regain some 4,000 square miles of territory and 400 towns, solidifying their grip over the western part of the country which includes the major population centers, while cutting off the main supply routes from Turkey for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the al-Nusra Front, Syria's Al Qaeda franchise.

The Russian intervention only underscored the phony character of the "war on ISIS" waged by the US, which was calibrated not to weaken the "rebels," among whom ISIS and al-Nusra counted as the most potent contingents.

The recent turn of events prompted angry and sarcastic editorials from both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, both of which from the outset have reflected the views of those within the US ruling establishment and the Obama administration itself who have pressed for a more direct US military intervention. Both papers ridiculed Obama for suggesting that the Putin government's Syrian intervention would lead it into a "quagmire."

"As quagmires go, Mr. Putin will take it," the *Journal* commented. "On Monday he announced that Russia will begin withdrawing the 'main part' of its forces in Syria having accomplished his strategic goals at little cost."

Similarly, the *Post* editorialized that far from landing in the quagmire, "Mr. Putin has accomplished quite a lot, and his gains have come at the expense of US interests and of Mr. Obama's stated goals in the region."

It would be a serious mistake to interpret the immediate conjuncture and the bitter recriminations over Putin's supposed victory as a signal that Washington has thrown in the towel over its Syrian intervention. US imperialism is not about to accept the consolidation of a regime in Syria allied to Moscow, any more than it will countenance the rise of Russia as a regional, much less global, rival.

For the moment, the Obama administration will seek to exploit the UN-brokered "peace talks" and any concessions that it can wring from Moscow, Tehran and the government of President Bashar al-Assad itself to pursue the regime change that it has been unable to bring about by force.

After the election in November, however, it may rapidly turn to new tactics. It is a longstanding practice of the US government to delay as much as possible the launching of new wars in election years until after the vote in order to prevent militarism from becoming a subject of popular political debate.

Within the Obama administration, there is a substantial faction that has consistently pressed for more direct US military intervention, as was highlighted by the recent article published in the *Atlantic* magazine, headlined "Obama's doctrine." It quoted figures like current Secretary of State John Kerry, former secretary of state and Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton, former defense secretary Leon Panetta and others criticizing Obama for failing to launch missile strikes in September 2013 over the fabricated charges that the Syrian government had carried out chemical weapons attacks.

Current Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is quoted explaining that Obama's view is that Asia "is the part of the world of greatest consequence to the American future." He is therefore loathe to have another US war in the Middle East distract from preparations for a military confrontation with China.

Regime change in Syria was always for US imperialism a means to an end. It was aimed at preparing for confrontations with both Russia and Iran by depriving them of a key regional ally.

That the US military is preparing for such a wider conflict found fresh and ominous confirmation in testimony given this week by the uniformed commander of the US Army.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley warned the House Armed Services Committee that, while his troops were prepared to conduct “counterterrorism” and “counterinsurgency” missions, fighting “ISIS, Al Qaeda, al-Nusra and any other terrorist groups,” he had “grave concerns” about their readiness to engage in a “great-power war” with an enemy such as China, Russia or Iran.

“There is a high level of risk associated with those contingencies right now,” he added, arguing that failing to build up US troop strength would be to “roll the dice.” After testifying, General Milley and other service commanders gave the congressional committee “risk assessments” for another major war in a closed session.

For all of the immense carnage suffered by the Syrian people, the dangerous spread of the conflict regionally and the massive flow of refugees into Western Europe, it is becoming increasingly clear that the criminal war for regime change in Syria represents only the antechamber of far bloodier and indeed global military conflagrations.

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