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Drew Cottle and Paul Antonopoulos

The war by proxy waged by the United States (US) against Syria cannot be understood in isolation and must be analysed in the greater geostrategic context of US imperialism's quest for dominating the Middle East, for resource control and dollar security. Since the end of the Cold War, after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, US imperialism has resorted to military force through its 'humanitarian intervention' in the destruction of Yugoslavia and Somalia, the military occupation of Haiti, its bombing of the Sudan and Afghanistan, and the bombing attacks on Iraq. The downing of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 saw the US launch its 'War on Terror' as a justification for further military operations in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

From 2002, the doctrine of 'preventive warfare' has been argued to justify US attacks on countries seen as supposed threats to US national security. This was emphasised when an 'Axis of Evil', comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea, was announced during a State of Union Address on January 29, 2002 by the then President George W. Bush (Bush 2002). The denunciation of these states by President Bush was further expanded into 'Beyond the Axis of Evil' when, on 6 May 2002, the then-Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton added Cuba, Libya and Syria to this supposed 'Axis of Evil' (Bolton 2002). In fact this 'Axis of Evil' consists of independent states which are not subservient to Washington.

That doctrine effectively meant that the scope of US operations became both regional and global. New US-driven wars began and old conflicts never ended. Most recently, the US invoked a threat to the human rights of Libyan citizens as a justification to destroy Libya, the same pretext used to organise a proxy war against Syria. Such claims have become a consistent theme of US intervention across the Middle East.

This article will explore the repercussions the war against Syria will have on that country and the wider region. These repercussions go beyond the interests of removing an anti-Washington government from power in Syria, of isolating Iran or of consolidating Israel's security; they incorporate a drive to dominate the resources of Central Asia. But how consistent or successful has been Washington's strategy on Syria?

The US drive for a 'New Middle East'

To critically understand the continuing US war by proxies against Syria, it must be placed in the strategic context of US efforts, since its invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, to create a 'New Middle East' (Nazemroaya 2006). Despite the apparent failures of its wars to subjugate Afghanistan and later Iraq, Washington has brought about regime change, along with social chaos, immiseration and deepening sectarian strife in the Middle East (Demeri 2015: 138). Long-time US partners in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as the other Gulf states along with Jordan, and despite some limited internal protests during the period of the 'Arab Spring', have been largely quarantined from the roiling violence that has gripped Syria and North Africa. Due to its geographical centrality in the Middle East, its proximity to Israel, its close relations with Iran and Hezbollah since the rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979, and with Russia from the early Cold War period, Syria has always been seen by Washington as vital to its remaking of the Middle East (Hof 2014).



(Map 1: Map Copyright Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Peters, published in the *Armed Forces Journal* in June 2006.)

The redrawing of the Middle East, as seen in the above map, demonstrates a further Balkanisation (the process of a region or state being divided or fragmented, as seen during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s) of the region into more manageable states. It suggests that Syria might cede its sovereign territory to a newly established Kurdish state and to an expanded Lebanon, which would take the entirety of the Mediterranean coast, leaving Syria landlocked. It also has Iran losing much of its Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea coasts to a newly established 'Arab Shia State' and to Baluchistan, as well as to an expanded Azerbaijan.

Some US advocates argue that this redrawing would be to correct the injustices of contemporary Middle Eastern borders which were created by the colonial powers, France and Great Britain. However, this redrawing along sectarian and ethnic lines would also serve to completely ruin the Axis of Resistance, a coalition comprising Iran-Syria-Hezbollah and which resists Israeli and US hegemony in the Middle East. The redrawing would isolate Iran from its allies in Damascus and south Lebanon.

The beginning of support for such a redrawing of borders can be seen in US support for Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq. In its occupation and remaking of Iraq, the US orchestrated a sectarian war between Sunni and Shia militias, funded largely by Saudi Arabia (Keynoush 2016: 187). Iraq was effectively reduced to a divided, federalised and weak state acceptable to Washington, Riyadh and Tel Aviv. The sectarian war in Iraq saw the rise of ISIS, at first al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Easily overrunning the small remaining remnants of the weak and dependent Iraqi Army in Mosul, ISIS claimed its Caliphate over regions of Iraq and Syria in June 2014 (House of Commons – Foreign Affairs Committee 2015: 13). The rapacity of ISIS (the terrorist organisation also known as ISIL, 'Islamic State' or DAESH) and its territorial expansion became the pretext for a limited and ineffectual military intervention by Washington and its allies, supposedly to advance a 'War on Terror'.

Some Sunni tribes and former Ba'athists swore allegiance to the ISIS Caliphate, which almost detached Iraq's Sunni heartland from the state. These tribes and former Ba'athists cited political discrimination from the formerly marginalised but now ruling Shi'ite majority who were accused of targeting the Sunnis and were engaged in an aggressive de-Baathification process (Natali 2015). Although the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict has failed to divide Iraq along sectarian lines, the autonomous Kurdistan Region headed by Masoud Barzani, an ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, threatened to make the region independent (Sahin 2016). A referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan was held in September 2017, finding strong support within the region. However Baghdad refused to accept the constitutionality and legitimacy of the poll and, after Iraqi forces easily retook Kirkuk city, Barzani stepped down as designated President of the disputed region (Chulov 2017). That does not mean the 'Kurdish gambit' in the region is over.

In this same manner, the United States supports the Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria, which also seeks autonomy or independence from the Syrian state (Council of Foreign Relations 2015). The YPG however are the Syrian branch of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which seeks autonomy or independence from Ankara and is recognised as a terrorist group by the United States, NATO and Australia (Phillip 2016: 111). In May 2017, US President Donald Trump approved the supply of weapons to the YPG, so as to continue its fight against ISIS (Stewart 2017). This move frustrated the Government of Turkey, which has made it clear that an autonomous or independent Kurdish state in Syria will never be tolerated, despite its own plans to redraw the map of the Middle East based on neo-Ottoman ambitions. Yet plans for a New Middle East are still afoot through an independent Kurdish state that is pro-Washington and pro-Tel Aviv. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has openly declared his support for an independent Kurdistan (Lazaroff 2014). These moves underwrite US hegemonic ambition in the region.

The primary reason for the planned destruction of Ba'athist Syria is because it forms an integral part of an 'Axis of Resistance', which opposes efforts for complete Israeli and US hegemony over the region. For that same reason, Washington has attempted to weaken Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent Russia, through a long and protracted war against Syria. It has been observed that Israel has limited its involvement in the Syrian War to mostly airstrikes against Hezbollah targets, as seen with the assassination of the Hezbollah commander Samir Kuntar in December 2015, as well as through the provision of logistical, arms and medical aid to jihadist forces (Issa and Karam 2017).

The US hopes that a long and protracted war in Syria would not only weaken the Syrian military, so that it cannot threaten Israel, but would also dismember the key threat to the Israeli state, the 'Axis of Resistance'. Israel hopes to consolidate its control of the occupied Palestinian and Syrian territories. Since the conclusion of the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel has illegally occupied the Syrian Golan Heights, as part of its process of colonising the region. Tel Aviv informally annexed the region in 1981 when the Golan Heights Law passed and applied Israeli "laws, jurisdiction and administration" to the contested region (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1981). The Arab Spring provided an opportunity for the staunch US-ally to consolidate its control over the Golan Heights.

An additional benefit for Israel was the discovery of oil in the southern Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Genie Energy were given exclusive rights to the exploration and drilling of this oil. The Board of Advisors to Genie Energy include the 46th US Vice President, Dick Cheney; former CIA head and chairman of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, James Woolsey; Jacob Lord Rothschild of the London banking dynasty family; and media mogul

Rupert Murdoch (Genie Oil Gas 2017). Energy, expansion and security considerations thus drive Israel to assist US hegemonic designs for the destruction of the Syrian state and the redrawing of a New Middle East. The Golan Heights has a 20,000-strong indigenous Syrian Druze population, who are now outnumbered by approximately 25,000 Israeli settlers (Baker 2017). Although the United Nations and Washington have not recognised Israeli control over the Golan Heights, access to Syrian resources serves not only to bolster Israel and US corporate interests, but also to weaken Syria, as the Arab country loses on revenues that could be used towards state-building or re-paying its mounting foreign debt.

The 'Axis of Resistance' poses the only real threat to the Israeli state, and the protracted war against Syria had the potential to weaken it. Although Israel has not engaged in many direct frontal attacks against Syria, it does enough in attempts to weaken Hezbollah and preserve jihadist forces fighting the Syrian Army near the Golan Heights. The Israeli Minister of Defense claimed in 2015 that "On a strategic level, in other words, we are not intervening on anyone's behalf" (Fishman 2015). Israel views the war against Syria to be to its own benefit.

It might also be suggested that the Syrian War is a front for an Iran-Israel proxy conflict, where neither country has been in direct conflict, but each seeks to undermine the other through proxies. Iran continues to directly fund and arm the Palestinian resistance, including the jihadist group Hamas, the Marxist-Leninist militia of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Lebanese resistance group Hezbollah, all of which have a stated goal of the destruction of a racially-based Israel (Kilroy 2008: 153).

Israel, for its part, directly supports al-Qaeda groups (Jabhat al Nusra and its allies) operating near the Golan Heights by providing medical care to injured fighters, despite some Israeli officials claiming that al Qaeda is an enemy. Amos Yildin, a former military intelligence chief in Israel was quoted by *The Wall Street Journal* as saying that Hezbollah and Iran:

"are the major threat to Israel, much more than the radical Sunni Islamists, who are also an enemy. Those Sunni elements who control some two-thirds to 90% of the border on the Golan aren't attacking Israel. This gives you some basis to think that they understand who is their real enemy - maybe it isn't Israel" (The Jerusalem Post 2015).

Prominent Syrian jihadist group Jaish al-Islam, which has locked women and children in cages as human shields, also announced that Israel is not their enemy (Lake 2016).

The protracted war against Syria hopes to further secure the one true partner of the US in the region, Israel. As the key US partner in the region, Israel has liberty to operate against forces like Hezbollah and the Syrian Army, the bulwarks of anti-American domination and opposition to the Israeli state in the region.

However, rather than weakening the 'Axis of Resistance' through a protracted war, the conflict seems to have strengthened the alliance by consolidating their allegiances, expanding into Iraq and bringing in Iranian military leadership. The Syrian Army and Hezbollah now have invaluable battle experience in urban, rural and desert warfare (Mohseni and Kalout 2017). The protracted war that was meant to destroy Syria has had the opposite effect, as the military alliance with Russia has been strengthened and reconstruction efforts in Syria have been guaranteed by Iran, Russia and China (Sputnik 2017).

A key US aim in the Middle East is to control Central Asian energy

Without the limited Russian military intervention to safeguard Syria's integrity as a functioning nation state, Washington's proxy war on Syria could have continued to reach

beyond the Middle East. Its proxy war against Syria was a regional component of escalating confrontations with Russia and China, for the control of the resource-rich Eurasian landmass.

During successive conflicts in the 1990s, the US decided to exploit its status as the global hegemon and sole military superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The possibilities of future higher minded military intervention to end ethnic violence, uphold human rights and build democratic nations was invoked when President George Bush announced a 'New World Order' on September 11, 1990. Bush claimed that this new world order would establish "new ways of working with other nations ... peaceful settlement of disputes, solidarity against aggression, reduced and controlled arsenals and just treatment of all peoples" (Roberts 1996: 170). However, emphasis was later given to the necessity of preventive war to destroy the emergence of possible threats to US interests. Peaceful settlements were often not sought, as Bush had claimed. In 2003 his son and then-President George W. Bush launched an invasion of Iraq. The then-United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced in September 2004 that, "from our point of view and the UN Charter point of view, it [the war] was illegal" (UN News Centre 2004).

It appeared that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unipolarity of US power across the globe, unilateralism came to dominate the thinking of the White House, Langley and Arlington, especially after the 'New World Order' announcement. Washington's domination of the United Nations helped it launch wars in Iraq, Somalia and Yugoslavia. However, with the events of September 11, 2001 the liberal ideology that had supposedly dominated the intermediate years, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was overthrown in favour of a new US realism. This justified US invasions and proxy wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. These successive interventions in the Arab world sought to stem a rising Chinese influence and a resurgent Russia in Central Asia by destabilising their immediate zones of influence and potential penetration (Lo 2008: 166). US unilateralism became increasingly militarised. At the end of the Cold War, the US effectively controlled its allies through the UN, NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and by use of the US dollar as the global reserve currency (Layne 2012).

The terrorist attack on New York in September 2001 provided the US with an opportunity for direct military intervention into the oil-rich Middle East, and to gain a foothold for greater influence in Central Asia. The establishment of permanent military bases in the Gulf States and new military bases in Central Asia became the vehicles for this ambition. The US maintains over 800 military bases in 70 host countries; this dwarfs Russia's military presence in ten countries and China's sole international military instalment in Djibouti (Vine 2015).

However, the logic behind the US imperial drive into the Middle East was not only weakening Chinese or Russian penetration into the resource-rich Central Asian steppes, but also to contain Iranian influence. By diverting Iranian and Russian attention onto Syria, and Chinese focus onto the South China Sea and the Korean peninsula, the US could more forcefully penetrate Central Asia. The domination of Afghanistan was the first move in this strategy. The removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq would soon follow. These twin invasions enabled the building of US military bases on the eastern and western axes of Iran, supposedly containing and reducing Iran's influence in Central Asia.

Argued as a response to imminent threats and terrorism, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq secured control of vast resources of Middle Eastern oil. The US conquest and occupation of Iraq was to be the next step in the planned reconstruction of the nations of the region. This redrawing of the Middle East map was based on both the overwhelming military strength of the US and the

growing reality of its economic vulnerability. Its military power would secure control of Middle Eastern oil and enable the US to reassert its weakening economic power, while safeguarding the role of the US dollar.

However with the United States moving to greater use of its own shale oil, energy markets have been reshaped because the giant consumer nation now imports much less foreign oil. Washington's client state Saudi Arabia manufactured an oil oversupply in 2014 that aimed to weaken Iran's economy because of the rapid drop in the oil price per barrel. Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro, stated in December 2014, "did you know there is an oil war? And the war has an objective: to destroy Russia. It's a strategically planned war... [it is] also aimed at Venezuela, to try and destroy our revolution and cause an economic collapse" (Cawthorne 2014). Although it is suggested that the targets of the oil oversupply were Russia and Venezuela, another state affected was Iran. Riyadh, as a mostly loyal servant to the hegemonic ambitions of the US, has engaged in an intense proxy war with Tehran not only in Syria but also in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain (Antonopoulos and Cottle 2017).

Saudi Arabia with its own regional ambitions backed Washington's wishes by playing its part to attack Iran's economy with an oil oversupply, compounding the damage of US-led sanctions against the Islamic Republic (see Antonopoulos and Cottle 2017). By targeting the Iranian economy, Washington hopes that Tehran will have to withdraw material and financial support to Hezbollah and Syria. Syria currently relies on Iranian loans and investments to prevent collapse of its war economy (The Middle East Eye 2014).

With Aleppo, the war-ravaged industrial centre of Syria, not producing anywhere like pre-war levels, manufacturing and exporting fell drastically (Bulos 2016). Intensification of sanctions against Iran and a Saudi oil oversupply targeting Iranian capabilities were supposed to weaken the Assad government's fight against terrorist groups. The Syrian President has claimed many times that, if all foreign support for the jihadist groups were to cease, the war would be over in a matter of months (O'Connor 2017). However, if Iran were to halt its immense financial support to Syria – estimated at around \$6 billion annually by UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura – there is a strong possibility that Syria would financially collapse (Lake 2015). With Iran mostly distracted in Syria and fighting its own economic battles, Washington hoped to remove the Islamic Republic of Iran in the struggle for Central Asia.

An 'Arab Winter' context to US Imperial Ambitions on Syria

During the emergency period of an 'Arab Winter' (usually referred to as the 'Arab Spring'), Washington responded differently to Libya and Syria than it did to the ousting of allies in Tunis and Cairo. We suggest an 'Arab Winter' is a more accurate description than an 'Arab Spring', because it saw the rise of Islamic extremism with gross human right violations and dramatic declines in the Libyan and Syrian economies. The long-time Tunisian president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, found sanctuary in Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was placed under house arrest in his Mediterranean villa. The radical popular demands in Tahrir Square, the focal point of the protests in Cairo's downtown, were ignored. In Tunisia and Egypt, leadership replacements were elected. Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood president, was tolerated for a time before being removed by General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, because of Mursi's advocacy of sectarian terrorism (Hendawi 2013). A military dictatorship in Egypt was preferred by Washington to 'temporary president' Morsi, with Washington's design on Egypt only slightly adjusted after the departure of Mubarak (Bloomberg 2016).

In neighbouring oil-rich Libya, the Government led by Muammar Gaddafi experienced an Arab Winter through the fostering of a jihadist insurgency against the Libyan state. Washington and its European allies, particularly France and the United Kingdom, charged the Libyan leader with crimes against humanity in his war against jihadist forces. Subsequently, NATO carried out air strikes against the infrastructure and installations of the Libyan state. Gaddafi was murdered on 20 October 2011 and Libya was virtually destroyed; reduced to a regionally and tribally divided failed state, controlled by warring factions but free of the threat of Western intervention (Genugten 2016: 160). Libyan oil flowed generously without any state restrictions after being privatised into the hands of foreign energy cartels (Campbell 2013: 191). A devastated Libya became another component of Washington's 'New Middle East'.

Libya's socialised economy under Gaddafi meant that education, healthcare and electricity were free, petrol was heavily subsidised, and natural resources were state-owned and largely independent of western cartels (Global Research News 2016). Importantly, Gaddafi had ambitions to unify Africa through a single currency called 'the Dinar' that would be backed by gold and would liberate the continent from the US Dollar monopoly (RT 2011). The move to a gold standard currency would mean that African states could trade their precious resources for gold and that would help the continent free itself from debt and poverty, while undermining the US paper currency. A US-led NATO did not necessarily want to dominate Libya, but rather weaken it; ensuring that plans for a change in currency were halted and that western control of oil was achieved (Walt 2015). The relatively easy success of Washington's Libyan experiment was the model and driver for Washington's next proxy war, against the Syrian state.

Ba'athist Syria, like Gaddafi's Libya, provided free education and healthcare, a limited redistribution of farmland and state-control of its small gas and oil fields (Mulhem 2017). In Syria, the first moments of the supposed Arab Spring came from popular protests for political reform, and then counter rallies in support of the government. However a distinct wave of Salafist-jihadist violence infiltrated the rallies, killing police and civilians. The armed response by the Syrian state to this armed insurgency became the pretext for the United States and its European and Middle Eastern allies, to demand the removal of the Assad government, because of supposed crimes against 'peaceful protestors'. Regime change in Syria became the persistent central focus of Washington's 'New Middle East'. Syria's strategic location in the Middle East, particularly as a pipelines hub and access point between Iran and Hezbollah, was central to US attempts to redraw the region (Antonopoulos and Cottle 2017: Chapter 6).

Syria's position places it at the crossroads of pipelines linking the oil and gas fields of the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf and the Iranian plateau with wealthy European markets. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad recognised this vital positioning and in 2009 unveiled a 'Four Seas' policy that hoped to create a "nexus of economic integration" between Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran, thereby linking the Mediterranean, Caspian, Black Sea and Persian Gulf into one bloc (Brooks 2010). However the establishment of a successful economic nexus between these states would threaten Washington's hegemonic plan for the region. Effectively, NATO-member Turkey would be integrated with Syria and Iran, as well as with an Iraq in which the United States had spent billions of dollars and destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives to bring state-owned oil under corporate control. The wave of protests that engulfed the Arab world in December 2010 provided Washington with the opportunity it needed to manipulate peaceful protests in Syria into an armed insurgency against the state.

The destruction of Syria as a functioning state would break the 'Axis of Resistance'. With Syria removed, Iran would be isolated and open to a US realignment of forces. So Washington's six-year campaign in Syria indirectly and directly armed domestic jihadist

groups (mainly linked through the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) against the Syrian state. Other components of this proxy war were international al Qaeda jihadists (ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front) (see Anderson 2016). These were expected to exhaust the capacities of the Syrian state.

The 2011 uprisings across the Arab world provided the perfect framework for the United States to topple a Syria which had been resistant to US influence and domination. Weapons provided by the US and used by jihadist forces in Libya found their way into the hands of jihadists in Syria (Chivers, Schmitt and Mazzetti 2013). This suggests that Washington was satisfied with the result achieved in Libya and attempted to replicate a similar strategy in Syria. However, military and policy planners in the United States failed to account for the fact that, unlike with an isolated Libya, Syria had allies willing to assist. This was seen with Hezbollah's military deployment to Syria in 2012, Iranian military advisors in 2012, and the Russian aerial intervention that began in September 2015, after an invitation from Damascus. Libya was afforded no such help when it was targeted and the state destroyed.

However Syria has always been targeted by US imperialism, and that is why the wave of the Arab Spring was seen as finally opening an opportunity to destabilise the country (Flounders 2011). On the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, General Wesley Clark, a retired 4-star U.S. Army General and former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, during the 1999 War on Yugoslavia, revealed that he was made aware in 2002 of a plan by which the United States would intervene in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and finally Iran (Clark 2003: 130). Although this did not occur within the five-year time frame that General Clarke was told, we have seen the destabilisation of all these states. In the case of Iran, the destabilisation was through intense US-led sanctions and cyber warfare (Sanger and Schmitt 2017). As can be seen in the 2017 Venezuelan crisis - where violent forces were portrayed in western media as peaceful protestors resisting violent security forces - Syria in 2011 was much the same target for media manipulation. All violence was blamed on security forces, providing excuses for 'humanitarian intervention' (see Anderson 2016).

Bungled US-led interventions against Syria

Despite the United States delivering weapons, food rations and pickup trucks to militants in Syria, almost from the onset of the war in 2011, Washington established a coalition which included Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Turkey and Qatar, and began its bombing campaign on 22 September, 2014 with the pretext of fighting ISIS (U.S. Department of State 2014). President Obama gave a speech which claimed the military goal was to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS. He continued: "I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are. That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL[ISIS] in Syria, as well as Iraq" (Obama 2014). In response to Obama's announcement, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said that the airstrikes cannot occur "without the consent of the legitimate government" and that "this step, in the absence of a UN Security Council decision, would be an act of aggression, a gross violation of international law" (Anishchuk and Irish 2014). The Syrian Minister of National Reconciliation, Ali Haidar, also responded to the illegal US intervention by emphasising that "any action of any kind without the consent of the Syrian government would be an attack on Syria" (RT 2015). This is not to say that Syria does not want to defeat the ISIS, but rather that Damascus recognises that the US-led military operation provides opportunities for Washington to further influence events on the ground, including attacks on the Syrian Army.

Syria's suspicions were confirmed when on 17 September 2016 US-led air forces were involved in what is now dubbed as the Deir Ezzor Air Raid. For over an hour between 3:55 to 4:56 p.m. Damascus time, the US-led coalition air forces bombarded Syrian Army positions on Tharda mountain, on the outskirts of Deir Ezzor, a government-held city that has been under an ISIS siege since 14 July 2014 (Almasy, Starr and Roth 2016). The resulting bombardment from multiple airstrikes was reported to have killed 106 Syrian soldiers and wounded a further 110. It also saw ISIS launch a counteroffensive against the Syrian Army, only seven minutes after the bombardment stopped. This attack saw the terror group take control of Tharda mountain, and so occupy high ground overlooking Deir Ezzor's military airfield (Fadel 2016).

In response to the US-led devastation of the Syrian Army at Tharda mountain, Australia's Department of Defence acknowledged its role "among a number of international aircraft" but claimed that it "never intentionally targeted a known Syrian military unit or actively support[ed] Daesh [ISIS]" (Antonopoulos 2016). Although Australia offered its condolences to the dead soldiers, it never formally apologised. The coalition had given the United States a pretext to militarily intervene to weaken the Syrian government's grasp of territory it controls, at the expense of forfeiting land to ISIS. This was surely in the hope that, with an ISIS takeover of Syrian Army held territory, it might later be 'liberated' by militant groups directly backed by Washington. This was quite consistent with the aim of 'regime change' in Syria.

The United States has an inconsistent practice concerning which armed groups it trains and arms in Syria. Washington's apparent disinterest in whom it supports meant that it supplied huge amounts of money and weapons to jihadist groups including Nour Al-Din Al-Zinki, a terrorist group which in July 2016 beheaded a 12-year old child it accused of spying (Davis 2016). This reckless arming of anti-government groups has been a consistent theme in Syria, where Washington has shown itself ready to destabilise and ruin Syria at almost any cost. It has continuously supported terrorists responsible for similar atrocities.

Meanwhile, both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon independently backed different militant groups which at times ended up fighting each other (Bulos, Hennihan and Bennet 2016). The lack of coordination between the different US intelligence agencies suggests either that there is no clear policy towards Syria or that the principal aim is destabilisation.

When Donald Trump was a US presidential candidate, he promised to backtrack on US demands for the removal of Assad as president of Syria. Trump announced that the greater focus would be on fighting ISIS. Despite this pre-election rhetoric, we have seen an escalation of US involvement against Syrian government forces, despite an end to one program of CIA funded terrorist groups ('moderate rebels') in Syria (Osborne 2017).

On 7 April 2017 the United States launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Syria's Shayrat Airbase, in Homs countryside. The strikes were in response to a Khan Shaykhun (in Idlib) chemical weapons incident on 4 April, that was immediately blamed on Syrian government forces. The strike represented the first direct, admitted military action by Washington against Syrian government forces. Trump stated that "it is in the vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons". He omitted reference to the US admitted fact of Syria having destroyed its entire chemical weapon stockpile. This was done under UN supervision in 2014 (Lopez and Nelson 2017).

In another incident on 18 May 2017 the US air force launched airstrikes against pro-Syrian government forces, killing a number of soldiers. US Defence Secretary General James Mattis

justified the attack by claiming the US was defending its troops within Syria. He stated, “we are not increasing our role in the Syrian civil war. But we will defend our troops” (Sky News 2017).

These two incidents demonstrate that Trump’s pre-election rhetoric of only fighting ISIS effectively meant nothing, and that the United States had maintained a direct role in fighting Syrian government forces and strengthening US-sponsored armed opposition groups. The scope of US imperialism continues regardless of whom is in the White House, as does the attempt to ruin Syria and undermine the Axis of Resistance.

All this demonstrates a duplicitous and bungled policy towards Syria. Inconsistent rhetoric continues to come from Washington. For example, both the Obama and Trump administrations made demands for the removal of President Assad, as the only way to resolve the Syrian war or at least to bring the US satisfaction (Sputnik 2017). This was despite Trump’s pre-election rhetoric that Assad need not be removed (Nichols 2017). It was not expected that President Assad would remain in power and, with the failure to depose him, it is unclear what is now Washington’s policy on Syria. If it is to weaken Syria, it has failed to make the state capitulate under intense economic pressures caused by the war. Rather, the war has strengthened the Axis of Resistance and consolidated Syria’s anti-Washington policy (Mohseni and Kahlout 2017). Whatever were the aims of Washington, whether to depose Assad or simply to weaken and ruin the Syrian state, both seem to have failed.

Repercussions of a successful US imperial outcome in Syria

A capitulation of the Syrian state would not only have seen Syria descend into the chaos of Iraq and Libya, it would also have dismembered the ‘Axis of Resistance’. Syria plays a pivotal role in that Axis by acting as a land bridge between Iranian material and other support destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon (Phillip 2016: 31). The destruction of Syria and the descent into regional and tribal chaos as seen in Libya, with the addition of ethnic and sectarian polarisation, could have seen the Balkanisation of the state along more easily manageable ethnic or religious enclaves, as anticipated by redrawing the region.

Such an outcome would have paved the way for US domination of the Middle East, and potentially also Central Asia. Washington did not necessarily need to directly control territory, but could have increased its influence had there been the total capitulation of yet another independent state, and the consequent threats to its regional goals were removed. Such was the case in Libya. In the case of Syria, a complete ruination of Syria and a protracted war was the desired outcome for Israel; while for Washington it seemed to be the removal of President Assad, to break the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah coalition.

However, with the war in its sixth year, the Axis of Resistance, with assistance from Russia, appears to have defeated the regime-change policy in Syria as it continues to break and push back US-backed forces. Although a ruined and weakened Syria would also have been an acceptable outcome to Washington and Tel Aviv, that also appears unlikely as Russia, China and Iran are already engaged in the rebuilding of Syria’s infrastructure, including by the offer of what seem to be fair and realistically repayable loans (Akulov 2016).

The survival of Syria as an independent nation will not only preserve the ‘Axis of Resistance’, but will severely hamper the ambitions of the US to dominate the region. It remains to be seen how Washington will react to failure of its Syria policy. A resurgent Iran always had the potential to undermine US desires to control Central Asia. An emboldened Iran means that the two key US partners in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, will feel increasingly threatened.

Hezbollah and the Syrian Army, with new battle experience, have the potential to push back and possibly liberate the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. On the other side, Saudi Arabia seems to have lost its opportunity to split Syria from its main perceived regional adversary, Iran. A similar process may be repeated in Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon where Saudi-Iranian proxy flashpoints persist.

US imperial projects - attempted in Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Syria – may not aim to destroy entire populations, but they do seek to subjugate them and impose US dominance. If the US had succeeded in Syria it would have opened ways for similar attempts in Iran, and for moves to eliminate the remaining areas of independent resistance in south Lebanon and in Ansarullah controlled Yemen.

Conclusion

Syria became crucial to Washington's engagement across the globe, but the war there represents another increasingly common chapter of US imperial ambitions failing. We have seen this previously in aggressions against Korea, Vietnam and Cuba. However, the Syrian case illustrates US power in decline. Its invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq were meant to consolidate its standing in the Middle East; but they have not stopped Iran from expanding its influence in the region.

In a move that was meant to surround and isolate Iran, the 2003 invasion of Iraq saw powerful Iran-backed Shi'ite militias emerge. The same was seen following US support for anti-government jihadist proxy armies in Syria. Rather than destroying the 'Axis of Resistance' to the benefit of Israel and Washington, the war against Syria has strengthened the Axis and mobilised the majority of the Syrian people in support of their Army and President Assad.

The US failure to overthrow President Assad through proxies will weaken its drive to dominate Central Asian resources. It has also exposed Israel to greater danger as Hezbollah and the Iranian military now operate in Syria, including along the occupied Syrian territory of the Golan Heights. Rather than US imperialism tightening its grip over the region, the survival of the Syrian government has galvanised anti-US forces in the region, strengthening their resolve to resist domination from Washington.

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