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The catastrophe unleashed by US imperialism in the Middle East

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In December 2011, having been forced to pull the last US combat troops out of Iraq after failing to secure a status of forces agreement with Baghdad, President Barack Obama repeatedly offered the assurance that “the tide of war is receding.”

Little more than two years later, the entire region is engulfed in violence due to the policies pursued by US imperialism, with the possibility of a region-wide war emerging as a serious threat.

The Obama administration is currently pursuing negotiations with Russia on a possible political settlement in Syria, and with Iran on a rapprochement based on an agreement on its nuclear program and at least a partial lifting of economic sanctions.

Both sets of talks were initiated last September, after Washington stepped back from the brink of a direct intervention in Syria that was overwhelmingly opposed by the people of the US and the entire world. Far from a turn to peace and diplomacy, however, the shift from bombing Syria to negotiations emerged as part of US imperialism’s “pivot to Asia,” based on the strategic conception that defusing the confrontation with Iran would create more favorable conditions for prosecuting the conflict with US imperialism’s more essential global rival, China.

Yet Washington is hardly managing to execute its pivot neatly. It is finding it increasingly difficult to extricate itself from an unfolding catastrophe of its own making in the Middle East.

The US-backed war for regime-change in Syria, which has claimed the lives of some 130,000 people and forced 9 million from their homes, has increasingly spilled across Syria's borders into Lebanon, where assassinations, suicide bombings and armed clashes have become daily occurrences, and Iraq, which has been the scene of an armed standoff between the Iraqi army and local militias in the western cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.

The primary responsibility—political and moral—for this bloodletting lies with US imperialism. It has committed war crimes whose dimensions can be compared only to those carried out by the Third Reich in the Second World War. Aggressive war—the principal charge leveled against Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg Trials—is also the chief crime of the US government, from which so many other horrors have flowed.

The Iraq war, promoted on the basis of lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, was a calculated and predatory act of imperialist aggression. It was aimed at asserting US hegemony in a strategically vital and oil-rich region and providing the entire planet with a “shock and awe” demonstration of the naked power of American militarism.

In the process, the US military succeeded not only in blowing to smithereens a fragile society, already war-ravaged and devastated by sanctions, but also undermining the entire regional state system.

Washington is responsible not only for the massive death toll in the nearly nine years of war in Iraq—placed by a recent US-Canadian survey at over 500,000—but also for the potentially millions more deaths to come given the continuing unraveling of the Middle East. The cost in blood of a new partition of the region would likely put the partition of India some 65 years ago in the shade.

In Iraq itself, these dangers can be seen clearly. The latest fighting was triggered by the sectarian-based repression unleashed by the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki against the predominantly Sunni population of Anbar province. The violent arrest of a prominent Sunni politician and the bloody crackdown on a year-old Sunni protest encampment in Ramadi led at the beginning of the year to Sunni militias seizing control of Fallujah and Ramadi. Armed clashes between the militias and the Iraqi army are continuing.

Among those involved in the fighting is the Al Qaeda-affiliated ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which has been one of the most prominent elements in the Western-backed proxy war to oust the government of President Bashar al-Assad across the border in Syria.

The sectarian conflict is not, as much of the media would have it, an age-old blood feud between Sunnis and Shia. It was triggered and fueled by the US intervention, which sought to exploit the sectarian issue as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy. This criminal policy found expression in

the ethnic cleansing operations carried out under the cover of the US military “surge” of 2007-2008. The Maliki government was placed in office under the US occupation, while the Iraqi military was transformed from a conscript army drawing its troops from every segment of society into an armed force based on the sectarian militias of the various Shiite parties.

As for Al Qaeda, it did not exist in Iraq before the US invaded. Now it has been vastly strengthened by the US-backed war in Syria and the flood of money and weaponry funneled by Washington and its regional allies to the so-called “rebels.”

Even as the conflict between the Shiite government and the Sunnis unfolds in Anbar, a new and potentially even bloodier confrontation is taking shape between the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north of Iraq and the regime in Baghdad over the KRG’s unilateral sale of oil, to be delivered abroad via a trans-Turkish pipeline. The move, denounced as illegal by the Maliki government, is seen as taking the KRG one step closer to outright independence and a partition that would likely involve a bitter struggle over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

Washington’s response to the spiraling crisis is to pour gasoline on the fire in a manner that is breathtaking for its cynicism. Virtually simultaneously, the Obama administration has announced the expedited shipment of Hellfire missiles and other weaponry to the Maliki regime—supposedly to exterminate the Al Qaeda-affiliated elements in Iraq—and the decision to renew direct aid to the “rebels” in Syria, including what is being promoted as a more “moderate” faction of Al Qaeda. This second decision follows a series of battles between these factions and ISIS.

The reckless and criminal character of US policy was summed up in a *New York Times* editorial Monday that acknowledged: “There is a danger that American aid could backfire as it did in the 1980s, when support for the Mujahedeen fighters battling the Soviets helped to create fertile ground for terrorist movements years later. But the risk may be worth it.”

As the 100th anniversary of the First World War approaches, it is becoming increasingly clear that the state system founded on the division of the region by the old colonial powers, France and Britain, in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 is being blown apart by new imperialist interventions and the impact on the oppressed nations of the Arab world of the crisis of global capitalism.

This development threatens to engulf the region in a sectarian bloodbath and serve as the spark for a new global conflagration.

These threats can be answered only by the international working class mobilizing its independent strength in a united struggle against capitalism. For the workers of the Middle East, this requires the building of a new socialist movement that fights to unite the working class across all national and sectarian boundaries in a common fight for the United Socialist States of the Middle East. The task before workers in the United States and Europe is the building of a mass socialist anti-

war movement dedicated to putting an end to the source of war and militarism, the capitalist profit system.