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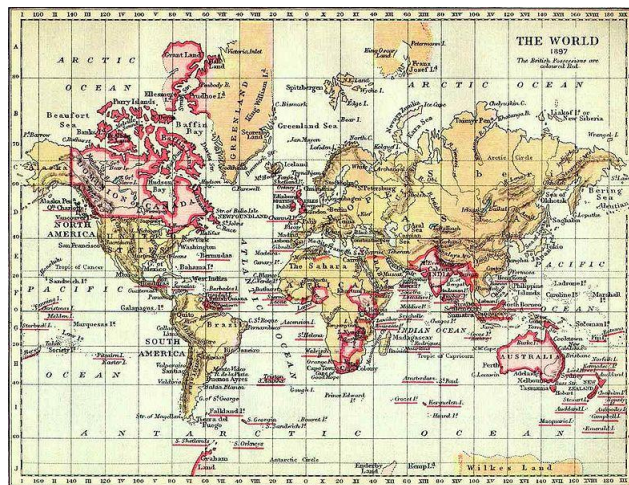
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## Those Old Colonial Lusts

by Eric Margolis  
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That old colonial impulse keeps coming back. This past week, Britain and France pushed the rest of the European Union to lift the arms embargo in Syria – which in plain English means outright military intervention in that nation's civil war.

Let's recall that Britain once ruled a quarter of the earth's surface and most of its oceans. France ruled much of West Africa, the Sahara and, after Word War I, what are today Syria and Lebanon. Britain ruled much of the rest of the Mideast.

Well, they're back! France and Britain took the lead in attacking Libya and overthrowing its long-time leader and former ally, Muammar Ghadaffi. They now dominate Libya's oil – a major source of energy for Europe. France just sent troops to protect its mining interests in former colonies, Mali and Niger.

Britain, which has invaded Afghanistan four times, is maintaining its troops there even though the war to dominate Afghanistan looks lost. Now, Britain has its sights set on reasserting its influence in Mesopotamia. France, Syria's former colonial ruler, is championing plans to overthrow Syria's government and reassert its domination of Lebanon, which it created during the colonial era.

Adding spice to this dangerous stew, Israel threatened this week to attack Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles if delivered to Syria. It remains unclear if these very effective missiles have yet arrived in Syria. Moscow promised S-300's years ago to both Damascus and Tehran, but delayed deliveries under US pressure. Last week, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad apparently said that the first deliveries of the potent defensive weapons had arrived.

Israel's three previous air attacks on Syria and threats to destroy S-300 missiles if emplaced there have sharply raised tensions with Moscow. The Russians, whose influence in Syria is being sharply challenged by the West, are low on patience at a time when even Israel is challenging Moscow.

Moscow's efforts to organize a peace conference over Syria are being thwarted by the EU's call to lift the so-called Syrian arms embargo and provide more military aid to anti-regime rebels. The entry of some Hezbollah fighters into battles along the Syrian-Lebanese border, and Shia-Sunni fighting inside Lebanon, underline the threat of the civil war becoming regionalized.

Will Russia sit back with its arms folded and watch rebels backed by the Western powers and conservative Arab states overthrow the Assad government? Russia has a small naval depot at Tartus, Syria, but it is hardly of major strategic importance. Of more concern to Moscow is that its influence in the Levant and Caucasus, which is being relentlessly chipped away by the US and its allies.

If Israel continues and intensifies its air strikes and goes after the S-300's when they are operational (which could take up to one year), Russia may be forced to intervene militarily just as it did in Egypt in 1970 during the "War of Attrition" on the Suez Canal. Russian anti-aircraft missile batteries and fighter squadrons battled Israel air power to a stalemate over the Canal and western Sinai.

Syria's civil war is clearly threatening to turn into a regional conflagration that involves both the subplot a Sunni-Shia conflict and blatant outside military intervention reminiscent of the 1930's Spanish civil war. There is also a deeper theme: a major effort to crush Syria, Iran's sole Arab ally. Right after US forces entered Baghdad in 2003, Israel's then prime minister Ariel Sharon urged Washington, "the road to Tehran lies through Baghdad." This time around, the route to Tehran runs via Damascus.

The western powers were lulled into over-confidence by their easy victory against feeble Libya. An armed rabble from Benghazi, NATO air power and special forces made quick work of Ghadaffi's toy army. But Syria, as we see, will not be push-over and may result in a ghastly Lebanese-style civil war that could last for a decade.

Worse, it could draw Russia, which has been quietly fuming over US-led efforts to push NATO right up to its borders in the Baltic, Eastern Europe and Caucasus, to send its military forces into action. The one thing the nuclear-armed United States and Russia must avoid at all costs is a head-on confrontation over Syria.

A political settlement remains the way out of this mess.