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Friends of Syria or Friends of Imperialism?

By Stephen Gowans

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The Friends of Syria—an 11 country coalition ranged against the Syrian government—favors what it calls a “democratic” transition in Damascus. There are multiple problems with this.

The coalition says that the current president, Bashar al-Assad, must have “no role in Syria.” How odd that an ostensibly democracy-promoting coalition should dictate to Syrians who it is who can’t be president of their country, rather than democratically leaving the question up to Syrians themselves.

Equally strange is that half of the coalition members do not support democracy in their own countries. Five of the 11—nearly one-half—are not, themselves, democracies, but are monarchies and emirates (Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) and one, Egypt, is a military dictatorship.

The formal democracies that make up the coalition’s other half—the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Turkey—are not promoting democratic transitions within the territories of their coalition partners, limiting their intervention to Syria alone.

Yet, while Syria has hardly conformed to the Western model of a multi-party democracy, it is not at all the undemocratic dictatorship it has been made out to be. It is not, for example, a Saudi

Arabia. It has a parliament. It is anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. And parts of the state, much to the annoyance of the US State Department, remain committed to socialist goals. Presidential elections are scheduled for 2014. Any Syrian, so long as he or she meets minimal basic criteria, is free to run. If Syrians don't want Assad, they'll be free to toss him out then.

On the other hand, coalition member Saudi Arabia is a family business. The Saud family calls the shots. There's no chance they'll be tossed out in elections, since they'll never have any. If Washington were truly interested in cobbling together "Friends of" coalitions to promote democratic transitions in undemocratic countries, it would have long ago put together a Friends of the Saudi People group.

Not that the United States ought to be ranging the globe, foisting its brand of democracy on others. Rather, its selective commitment to democracy promotion (only in countries not under its thumb but not in satellite states), speaks volumes about what US foreign policy is really about—and just how far removed from a meaningful democracy the US version is.

Equally fatal to the idea that the Friends seek democracy in Syria is this: one of its number, Egypt, is ruled by a government installed by the military, after it ousted a democratically-elected government. The charge that Syria's Assad has to go because he is killing his own people (insurgents) hasn't stopped the Egyptian military from killing demonstrators who call for the restoration of their elected government. They deserve the appellation "pro-democracy protestors" more than do the Islamist insurgents who used turmoil in Arab countries to inspire a return to jihad against the secular Arab nationalists in Damascus.

And what of the coalition's formal democracies? All are former colonial powers. They cared not one whit about democracy when they held the greater part of humanity in colonial thrall, including the people who lived in what is modern day Syria. By their actions and duplicity, they've revealed themselves to care as little about democracy in the Arab world as they did when four of them (the Turks, Italians, British and French) ruled Arabs by edict from afar.

Six former colonial powers in a coalition with five tyrannies, telling Syrians who they can't have as president, supporting a group of exiles who wait in the wings for the signal to traipse onto the Syrian stage as Washington's marionette, is hardly the picture of democracy-promoters. If you believe otherwise, then democracy is nothing but a euphemism for imperialism, an emotionally appealing word tossed around as a cover for the very negation of what the Friends of Syria profess to seek.