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America's "Long War": Pentagon Rallies Arab, Israeli Allies Against Syria and Iran

By Rick Rozoff

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Pentagon Chief Rallies Arab, Israeli Allies Against Syria, Iran U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has begun a five-day, four-nation tour of North Africa and the Middle East to consolidate military ties with traditional allies against the backdrop of mounting Western pressure aimed at the governments of Syria and Iran.

His first two stops are to Tunisia and Egypt, long-standing American military client states and members of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue partnership program. The next two are to Israel and Jordan, also Mediterranean Dialogue members, the first the main and the second one of the largest recipients of American military aid.

The two North African countries were the bellwethers of the so-called Arab Spring, a topic Panetta dwelled on at some length during his visit to Tunisia, though in relation to following Pentagon diktat Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak might well still be in power for all the difference that now exists. Last year's biennial joint U.S.-Egyptian Bright Star military exercise was cancelled during the early months of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but there is no reason to believe next year's won't go ahead as usual.

Four months ago Washington released \$1.3 billion in military assistance to the Egyptian junta, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton waiving congressional conditions introduced last year and State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland stating, "These decisions reflect America's

over-arching goal: to maintain our strategic partnership with an Egypt made stronger and more stable by a successful transition to democracy.”

The strategic partnership is one that began with the Carter-Brzezinski administration buying off President Anwar Sadat in 1978 and in so doing switching the largest and militarily most powerful Arab nation from non-alignment (Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser was a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement) and close state-to-state relations with the Soviet Union to the U.S.’s major military client state in Africa and the Arab world. It was also initiated to break the back of Arab unity in relation to Israel and Palestine.

Because of its unique value to the Pentagon, Egypt is the only African nation not to be assigned to the Pentagon’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), instead remaining in Central Command. The latter, launched in 1983, grew out of the Carter administration’s Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which had been established to counter Soviet bloc influence in Northeast Africa: Egypt, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan.

Similarly and for complementary geopolitical purposes, Israel is the only Middle Eastern nation not in Central Command’s area of responsibility, instead being assigned to that of European Command.

Since the Camp David Accords of 1978, Egypt has been one of the two largest recipients of annual American aid (almost all of it military) and a dependable Pentagon ally bordering Israel and the Gaza Strip to the east, Libya to the west and Sudan to the south as well as controlling the Suez Canal connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean is the route through which U.S. warships, including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and their assigned strike groups, pass after leaving the eastern coast of the U.S. en route to the Suez, whence they pass through the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the broader Indian Ocean for air strikes in Afghanistan.

Panetta, no matter what he says formally, is visiting Egypt to ensure it remains in the American political and, especially, military column.

According to the Pentagon website, “The United States has had a strong military-to-military relationship with Egypt since the 1970s, and Panetta said he wants that relationship to continue and grow.”

En route to Tunisia, Panetta stated to reporters: “Our goal is to advance security by supporting peaceful change throughout the region. This means establishing strong partnerships with new democratic governments in the region.”

He also said that the recent Syrian government offensive against armed insurgents in Aleppo will be – will be made to be – “a nail in Assad’s coffin.” He, like his civilian opposite number Hillary Clinton (“Wow!...We came, we saw, he died”), is not noted for excelling in the powers of abstract thinking, so his comment is not to be interpreted as merely a metaphor.

As though alleged humanitarian intervention was not casus belli enough, Panetta also invoked

the Iraq war-style menace of “chemical and biological warfare sites in Syria that U.S. planners say need to be secured.”

About those exaggerated threats, he said, “We’ve been in close coordination with countries in the region to ensure that this is happening.”

He also pledged to strengthen the “very close partnership” with Israel, particularly in respect to Iran. According to the Pentagon, “Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons technology will be a discussion point at all stops.”

The defense chief added:

“My view is that when I sit down with my counterpart in Israel, we are unified in our view with regards to Iran. We’re unified in the position that they should not obtain a nuclear weapon, (and) we’re unified in our position that we have to bring every bit of pressure on them to change their ways.”

“The more we are working together, the more unified we are in the effort against Iran, the better off we will be in convincing Iran that there is no room here for them to do anything other than to back away from the nuclear program they are engaged in.”

Panetta will inspect the U.S.-funded Iron Dome anti-missile system while in Israel.

Again according to the Defense Department’s account of his position while on the way to Tunisia, “Peaceful, democratic change has taken place since the Arab Spring, but Syria, Iran and extremism in general have continued to pose challenges.”

That is, Panetta’s mission is to recruit America’s Tunisian, Egyptian, Israeli and Jordanian military allies to confront Syria and Iran.

The Pentagon’s website cited an unnamed senior Defense Department official affirming that “Panetta plans to lay out the roadmap for the future military-to-military relationship between the United States and Tunisia.” He was quoted asserting that “The military has played a positive role in Tunisia and we want that to continue.”

During the press conference aboard the aircraft taking him to Tunisia, Panetta explained what Washington understands to be both the means and the ends of so-called democracy promotion in stating, “The United States continues to support efforts to strengthen Tunisia’s democracy, and DOD [the Department of Defense] will play an important role in that effort.”

In Egypt Panetta will meet with newly installed President Muhammad Mursi and Defense Minister Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi – “Panetta has been in constant touch with Tantawi since former President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown” – who led the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces from February 11, 2011 to June 30, 2012.

In Israel he will consult with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Shimon Peres and

Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

Then he will hold talks on bilateral military cooperation with King Abdullah in Jordan. According to the above-cited Pentagon official, “Syria will obviously be a topic of conversation, as the Jordanians are on the front line of that.”

As with his visits earlier this year to South America and Asia, Panetta’s trip to North Africa and the Middle East has a concrete objective: To solidify military ties with states bordering or near the remaining handful of nations in the world not enmeshed in the Pentagon’s global network.