

Escalation and US-NATO Military Intervention in Syria? War spreads to Lebanon

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Escalating fighting in Lebanon along with growing efforts by the US and the European powers to arm the Syrian rebels are raising the risk of a region-wide war. Lebanon, having served as a corridor for arms shipments to US-backed Sunni opposition forces inside Syria, is itself becoming a war theater.

Fighting raged last week between Alawites aligned with Bashar al-Assad and Sunni oppositionists in the Lebanese city of Tripoli, killing at least 23 and wounding 170. As of Sunday night, the Lebanese *Daily Star* reported that clashes were set to continue today, for the eighth straight day. Significantly, fighting has spread to the Lebanese capital, Beirut. On Sunday, rockets struck Hezbollah-held areas of Beirut, including a residential building and car showroom, leaving at least three wounded. A Syrian rebel, Ammar al-Wawi, stated that the rocket attacks were launched in retaliation for Hezbollah's support of Assad.

"In coming days we will do more than this," he threatened. "This is a warning to Hezbollah and the Lebanese government to keep Hezbollah's hands off Syria."

Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah declared that his movement will not back away from its support for Assad. "We will continue to the end of the road. We accept this responsibility and will accept all sacrifices and expected consequences of this position," Nasrallah said in the speech Saturday.

The fighting in Lebanon demonstrates the explosive repercussions of Washington's policy of stoking sectarian conflict to advance its strategic aims. As the Washington Post wrote last week, "the two-year Syrian conflict has become a regional war and a de facto US proxy fight with Iran." Iran, which is aligned with Assad and with Hezbollah, has allegedly been flying weapons to the regime in Syria with the support of the Shi'ite majority regime in Iraq.

Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics told CNN's Fareed Zakaria that Iran, as well as Hezbollah, "have made it very clear, Assad is a red line." The situation points to a massive, region-wide conflict.

While peace talks are scheduled, dubbed Geneva 2, the US and its regional allies are using the occasion to prepare for war. The US is using the possibility of talks to consolidate its "coalition of the willing," which includes Britain, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

US and opposition representatives have made clear that they will accept a negotiated

solution only on condition that Assad be removed and that the remains of his regime subordinate themselves to a deal with Washington's Sunni Islamist proxies.

The imperialist powers are preparing to ramp up their indirect interventions in Syria. European leaders are meeting in Brussels on Monday, where British representatives will make the case for ending the arms embargo against Syria, opening the way for European efforts to arm the opposition.

Last week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 15-3 to allow Washington to arm the rebel militias. Senators Robert Menendez and Bob Corker sponsored the bill, which gives the green light for "critical support to the Syrian opposition through provision of military assistance, training, and additional humanitarian support."

"The time to act and turn the tide against Assad is now," Senator Menendez stated at the hearing on the bill. "The United States must play a role in tipping the scales toward opposition groups and working to build a free and democratic Syria."

Leading Democrats supported the bill, while claiming that Obama has acted too timidly in Syria. "We've all been frustrated that our country hasn't done enough to be responsive," said Sen. Bob Casey. "I think it's in our national-security interests to address this"--that is, arming the rebels.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio said, "I believe it's in the national interest of the United States to ensure that the strongest, best-organized, and best-funded elements in a post-Assad Syria and even before his fall are interests that are aligned with us."

Republican Senator Rand Paul criticized the vote, saying: "This is an important moment. You will be funding, today, the allies of Al Qaeda." In fact, Washington, both the major US parties, and Washington's Middle East allies have been backing Al Qaeda-linked forces throughout the US proxy war in Syria, which began in 2011.

Opposition representatives have emphasized their unwillingness to accept any settlement that leaves Assad in power despite Assad's agreement "in principle" to attend talks.

"We are ready to enter into negotiations that are aimed towards transferring power to the people, towards a democratic transition. And that of course means Assad cannot be a part of Syria in the future," stated Louay Safi of the opposition Syrian National Coalition. Should the regime reject such demands, as appears likely, the failure of the talks would serve as a pretext for military escalation.

"We do not have too much illusion," said Ahmed Kamel, another opposition representative. "We know the regime, we know Assad, and we know that he would never quit power without force."

"The international community says that they can remove Assad from power; so does the US," Mr. Kamel added.

The Geneva talks come against the backdrop of serious defeats of the US-backed opposition at the hands of Assad's forces. The opposition, in a sign of its precarious position, is now calling for a "humanitarian corridor" centered on the strategic town of Qusayr, which regime forces seized on May 19, in a major blow to the opposition.

Despite its supposedly “humanitarian” character, such a corridor would be carved out by means of US airstrikes and ground operations, and will serve as a safe-zone, allowing rebel militias to regroup without fear of attack by Assad’s forces. The creation of such a safe-zone would require major deployments by the US and its allies. As usual, the language of humanitarianism is being applied to cover a full-scale military incursion by the US.

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