

Hillary Clinton and Her Hawks. Broader Military Role in Syria Contemplated

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Focusing on domestic issues, Hillary Clinton's acceptance speech sidestepped the deep concerns anti-war Democrats have about her hawkish foreign policy, which is already taking shape in the shadows, reports Gareth Porter.

As Hillary Clinton begins her final charge for the White House, her advisers are already recommending air strikes and other new military measures against the Assad regime in Syria.

The clear signals of Clinton's readiness to go to war appears to be aimed at influencing the course of the war in Syria as well as U.S. policy over the remaining six months of the Obama administration. (She also may be hoping to corral the votes of Republican neoconservatives concerned about Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy.)



Defense Secretary Leon Panetta with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at NATO conference in Munich, Germany, Feb. 4 (Official Defense Department photo)

Last month, the think tank run by Michele Flournoy, the former Defense Department official considered to be most likely to be Clinton's choice to be Secretary of Defense, explicitly called for "limited military strikes" against the Assad regime.

And earlier this month Leon Panetta, former Defense Secretary and CIA Director, who has been advising candidate Clinton, declared in an interview that the next president would have to increase the number of Special Forces and carry out air strikes to help "moderate" groups against President Bashar al-Assad. (When Panetta gave a belligerent speech at the Democratic National Convention on Wednesday night, he was interrupted by chants from

the delegates on the floor of “no more war!”

Flournoy co-founded the Center for New American Security (CNAS) in 2007 to promote support for U.S. war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then became Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Obama administration in 2009.

Flournoy left her Pentagon position in 2012 and returned to CNAS as Chief Executive Officer. She has been described by ultimate insider journalist David Ignatius of the Washington Post, as being on a “short, short list” for the job Secretary of Defense in a Clinton administration.

Last month, CNAS published a [report of a “Study Group”](#) on military policy in Syria on the eve of the organization’s annual conference. Ostensibly focused on how to defeat the Islamic State, the report recommends new U.S. military actions against the Assad regime.

Flournoy chaired the task force, along with CNAS president Richard Fontaine, and publicly embraced its main policy recommendation in remarks at the conference.

She called for “using limited military coercion” to help support the forces seeking to force President Assad from power, in part by creating a “no bombing” zone over those areas in which the opposition groups backed by the United States could operate safely.

In an [interview with Defense One](#), Flournoy described the no-bomb zone as saying to the Russian and Syrian governments, “If you bomb the folks we support, we will retaliate using standoff means to destroy [Russian] proxy forces, or, in this case, Syrian assets.” That would “stop the bombing of certain civilian populations,” Flournoy said.

In a [letter to the editor of Defense One](#), Flournoy denied having advocated “putting U.S. combat troops on the ground to take territory from Assad’s forces or remove Assad from power,” which she said the title and content of the article had suggested.

But she confirmed that she had argued that “the U.S. should under some circumstances consider using limited military coercion – primarily strikes using standoff weapons – to retaliate against Syrian military targets” for attacks on civilian or opposition groups “and to set more favorable conditions on the ground for a negotiated political settlement.”

Renaming a ‘No-Fly’ Zone

The proposal for a “no bombing zone” has clearly replaced the “no fly zone,” which Clinton has repeatedly supported in the past as the slogan to cover a much broader U.S. military role in Syria.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Panetta served as Defense Secretary and CIA Director in the Obama administration when Clinton was Secretary of State, and was Clinton's ally on Syria policy. On July 17, he [gave an interview to CBS News](#) in which he called for steps that partly complemented and partly paralleled the recommendations in the CNAS paper.

"I think the likelihood is that the next president is gonna have to consider adding additional special forces on the ground," Panetta said, "to try to assist those moderate forces that are taking on ISIS and that are taking on Assad's forces."

Panetta was deliberately conflating two different issues in supporting more U.S. Special Forces in Syria. The existing military mission for those forces is to support the anti-ISIS forces made up overwhelmingly of the Kurdish YPG and a few opposition groups.

Neither the Kurds nor the opposition groups the Special Forces are supporting are fighting against the Assad regime. What Panetta presented as a need only for additional personnel is in fact a completely new U.S. mission for Special Forces of putting military pressure on the Assad regime.

He also called for increasing "strikes" in order to "put increasing pressure on ISIS but also on Assad." That wording, which jibes with the Fournoy-CNAS recommendation, again conflates two entirely different strategic programs as a single program.

The Panetta ploys in confusing two separate policy issues reflects the reality that the majority of the American public strongly supports doing more militarily to defeat ISIS but has been opposed to U.S. war against the government in Syria.

A [poll taken last spring](#) showed 57 percent in favor of a more aggressive U.S. military force against ISIS. [The last time public opinion was surveyed](#) on the issue of war against the Assad regime, however, was in September 2013, just as Congress was about to vote on authorizing such a strike.

At that time, 55 percent to 77 percent of those surveyed opposed the use of military force

against the Syrian regime, depending on whether Congress voted to authorize such a strike or to oppose it.

Shaping the Debate

It is highly unusual, if not unprecedented, for figures known to be close to a presidential candidate to make public recommendations for new and broader war abroad. The fact that such explicit plans for military strikes against the Assad regime were aired so openly soon after Clinton had clinched the Democratic nomination suggests that Clinton had encouraged Flournoy and Panetta to do so.



Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. (Photo by Lorie Shaull, Wikipedia)

The rationale for doing so is evidently not to strengthen her public support at home but to shape the policy decisions made by the Obama administration and the coalition of external supporters of the armed opposition to Assad.

Obama's refusal to threaten to use military force on behalf of the anti-Assad forces or to step up military assistance to them has provoked a series of leaks to the news media by unnamed officials – primarily from the Defense Department – criticizing Obama's willingness to cooperate with Russia in seeking a Syrian ceasefire and political settlement as "naïve."

The news of Clinton's advisers calling openly for military measures signals to those critics in the administration to continue to push for a more aggressive policy on the premise that she will do just that as president.

Even more important to Clinton and close associates, however, is the hope of encouraging Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been supporting the armed opposition to Assad, to persist in and even intensify their efforts in the face of the prospect of U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Even before the recommendations were revealed, specialists on Syria in Washington think tanks were already observing signs that Saudi and Qatari policymakers were waiting for the Obama administration to end in the hope that Clinton would be elected and take a more activist role in the war against Assad.

The new Prime Minister of Turkey, Binali Yildirim, however, made a statement on July 13 suggesting that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may be considering a deal with Russia and the Assad regime at the expense of both Syrian Kurds and the anti-Assad

opposition.

That certainly would have alarmed Clinton's advisers, and four days later, Panetta made his comments on network television about what "the next president" would have to do in Syria.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare.

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