

Military Escalation. Qatar “Friends of Syria” Conference Opens “New Stage” in Syrian War

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The “Friends of Syria” meeting in Qatar on June 22 ended with a communiqué announcing that Washington and its allies will “take all necessary practical measures” to arm the right-wing Sunni-based opposition forces, which have served as their proxies in a two-year civil war to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The announcement opens up a new stage in the war, and heightens the dangers of a regional sectarian conflagration.

The communiqué of the “Friends of Syria”—the Orwellian name given to the coalition of the US, its NATO allies, Britain, France, Italy, Germany and Turkey, and the Sunni states of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar—can only be described as a criminal and reckless document. It proposes to supply sufficient weapons and supplies to the anti-Assad opposition to enable it to counter the Syrian military ahead of “peace talks” in Geneva. The document also hints at US and NATO military operations along Syria’s borders to prevent Shiite fighters from Lebanon, Iraq and Iran assisting the pro-government forces—even as imperialist aid pours in for the so-called “rebels.”

Once again, the imperialist instigators of the civil war assert that Assad and his close supporters have “no role” in Syria’s future. This is a transparent attempt to foment dissent among pro-Assad forces and trigger the collapse of the government.

Plumbing the depths of hypocrisy, the communiqué expresses “strong concern” over “increasing presence and growing radicalism in the conflict” and “terrorist elements in Syria”. The “terrorists” are Sunni extremist groups, linked to Al Qaeda, that have played the leading role in the fighting against the Assad regime and have been one of the beneficiaries of the weapons sent to Syria by US allies in the region. The stepped-up flow of arms now underway will further aid their sectarian attacks on Syria’s Alawite Shiite minority.

US Secretary of State John Kerry played the leading role in Qatar in pressuring participants to agree to the communiqué. It was adopted in defiance of sharp warnings by Russian President Vladimir Putin against the further arming of the Sunni extremists. Germany and several other countries reportedly raised concerns that the provision of arms would only further fuel sectarian Shiite-Sunni tensions across the Middle East. The US-led proxy war in Syria has already led to an escalation in fighting between rival Shiite and Sunni factions in both Lebanon and Iraq. The German government nevertheless signed off on the document.

The communiqué follows a June 14 declaration by the Obama administration that its unproven and highly dubious assertion that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons justified Washington’s provision of military aid to anti-Assad forces. In fact, as a *Los Angeles Times* report on June 21 indicated, US intelligence and military officers have been on the

ground in Jordan and Turkey since late 2012, training rebel fighters.

Representatives of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) boasted last week that the US announcement had already resulted in the delivery of sophisticated arms, including armour piercing anti-tank weapons and anti-aircraft missile launchers. FSA spokesman Louay Muqdad told Agence France Presse that the supplies, “will change the course of the battle on the ground.”

Khalid Saleh, a representative of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, told the *Washington Post* that the US action had sent “a very strong signal to the other countries” to step up their arming of the rebel fighters. Weapons shipments, paid for by the Gulf state monarchies, are allegedly coming in from Libyan arms dealers and include Russian-made Konkurs anti-tank missiles. Fighting has reportedly increased around the northern city of Aleppo as the opposition makes use of the new hardware to launch counter-attacks on Syrian military positions.

The Qatar meeting has been greeted in US strategic and political circles as an important step, but one that must be followed by more direct American military involvement in the Syrian war.

The *Washington Post* editorial on June 21 called for a Kosovo-style intervention against Syria, implying that an air war should be waged to support the anti-Assad opposition and that a “peace-keeping force”—including American troops—should be sent into the country once the regime fell.

In the *USA Today* yesterday, Brookings Institution strategic analysts Michael Doran and Michael O’Hanlon likewise called for open intervention to ensure Assad’s overthrow. “We can provide not only light arms, but also heavier weaponry and even air support if necessary,” they wrote.

Spelling out the logic of the regime-change operation, Doran and O’Hanlon asserted: “The calculus of Assad and his Iranian patrons will not change until Aleppo and Damascus are squarely and permanently under rebel control. These are the near-term strategic goals that the US must set for the opposition, and the United States must work to give the rebels the support necessary to achieve them. We cannot expect Assad and his inner-circle elite to accept exile until they are certain that the two major cities of Syria are beyond their control.”

What is being proposed is a bloodbath. The seizure of Aleppo and Damascus would require the bombardment of the two most densely populated urban areas in Syria and the bloody slaughter of the pro-government forces that have, until now, resisted the Sunni forces that Washington is seeking to install in power. Given the sectarian crimes already carried out by Sunni extremist militias, it would also lead to pogroms, particularly against Shiite Alawites.

The determination of the US ruling elite to realise its predatory ambitions to place the entire Middle East under its political and military dominance has produced atrocity after atrocity, above all the massive death and destruction inflicted in Iraq. In Syria, an estimated 90,000 people have already lost their lives. The stepped-up drive now taking place to reduce Syria to a US client-state portends yet more war crimes.

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