

US Defense Secretary Says Washington Weighs Arming of Syrian Insurgency

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Global Research, May 03, 2013

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Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel told a Pentagon press conference Thursday that the US is “rethinking” policy on directly arming the so-called rebels in Syria.

Appearing with British Defense Minister Philip Hammond, Hagel became the first Obama administration official to acknowledge that Washington is considering a qualitative escalation of its proxy war in Syria.

“Arming the rebels; that’s an option,” Hagel said. Asked directly whether the administration was considering such a step, he replied: “Yes.”

Hammond echoed Hagel’s position, stating that Britain has “not thus far provided any arms to the rebels, but we have never said it’s something we will not do.” He added that London was concerned with “legality,” and was presently subject to a European Union ban on supplying arms to any side in Syria.

“We will look at the situation when that ban expires in a few weeks’ time,” the defense minister said. Britain and France have been pressuring other European powers to alter the sanctions regime, so that they both can directly transfer weapons to the Islamist-dominated militias fighting Syrian government forces.

In reality, both the US and Britain are already deeply involved in supporting the forces fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad. The CIA has established a covert station in Turkey near the Syrian border to coordinate the shipment of arms from that country as well as Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, both US and British military forces have undertaken the training of so-called rebels inside Jordan.

Both imperialist powers have seized upon fabricated accounts of the Syrian government using chemical weapons as a pretext for intervening more directly in the sectarian civil war that they have fomented inside the country.

Hammond was somewhat candid about the British government’s difficulties in dragging the country into another war in the Middle East, given bitter memories over the lies about “weapons of mass destruction” used to force through a war against Iraq.

“There is a strong sense in U.K. public opinion that we went to war in Iraq on the back of evidence that proved not to be correct,” Hammond said. “In British political space, it is called the dodgy dossier.”

But it is precisely such “evidence” that is being cooked up once again.

The principal incident that both governments have referred to took place in March outside the city of Aleppo. The Syrian government has charged that it was the Western-backed “rebels” that employed some kind of chemical device, which struck a government-controlled neighborhood, killing 16 government soldiers and 10 civilians.

Hammond told Thursday’s Pentagon press conference that both governments “recognize there is compelling but not conclusive evidence of chemical weapons use.” Significantly, Hammond stopped short of saying “use” by whom.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday that, “Some U.S. military officials believe extremist rebel groups in Syria, possibly including the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, may have used the chemical weapons in a bid to prod more direct action by the West against the Syrian government.”

Neither US nor British officials have shown any great concern about coherence in their fabricated indictment against Damascus over chemical weapons use or what policy should flow from it.

On the one hand, both governments have suggested that intervention may be required to prevent chemical weapons from falling into the hands of “extremists.” On the other, they are both openly discussing measures to increase the flow of lethal arms to these very same “extremists”—the “rebel” forces that consist almost entirely of Islamist militias like the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front.

Pentagon spokesman George Little said Thursday that the US military was reviewing a range of options for intervention in Syria, UPI reported. “That’s our responsibility and we believe it is important to have options on the shelf to pull off in case the president looks to us to execute those options,” he said.

According to US officials, these “options” include not only directly arming the anti-Assad forces, but also imposing a “no-fly zone”—a measure that would be prepared through massive bombing of Syrian anti-aircraft defenses and corresponding loss of Syrian lives—and bombarding Syria with cruise missiles fired from US submarines and stealth bombers. Also under consideration is direct ground intervention on the pretext of securing Syrian chemical weapons, an action that the Pentagon brass say would require 75,000 troops.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, voiced apparent reservations within the American military command over direct intervention. Speaking on Tuesday, he said that a no-fly zone would be a very costly endeavor while having little real impact on the fighting, which is overwhelmingly conducted by ground forces.

He described himself as “cautious” about any US military intervention, warning that it was unlikely “to produce the kind of outcome I think that not only members of Congress but all of us would desire, which is an end to the violence, some kind of political reconciliation among the parties, and a stable Syria.”

The Western-backed war for regime change in Syria now threatens to engulf the entire region.

Iraq in April saw its bloodiest month since 2008, when sectarian conflict between Shiites and

Sunnis wracked the country under the US military occupation. According to UN sources, at least 700 people were killed over the course of the month. The country has the same sectarian divide as Syria, but in reverse proportions, with a Shia majority and a Sunni minority.

Al Qaeda in Iraq founded the Nusra Front in Syria and has become increasingly active in carrying out a bombing campaign against Shia populations in Iraq. At the same time, the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has responded to Sunni protests with lethal violence.

"It is wrong to say we are getting close to a civil war," an Iraqi politician told the British *Independent*. "The civil war has already started."

Fears that Lebanon could also slide into civil war were heightened this week with a public statement by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah that the Lebanese Shia mass movement would not allow the overthrow of the Assad regime, its ally.

And in Turkey, where the protracted blood-letting in Syria has created increasing popular revulsion, an incident took place Thursday in which armed men described as Syrian rebels opened fire on border police, killing one and wounding several others. The Turkish government has backed the Islamist "rebels" and pressured its NATO allies for more direct intervention.

A new poll by the Pew Research Center found mounting concern over the Syrian civil war spilling across borders and overwhelming opposition in the surrounding Arab countries to Western military assistance to anti-Assad militias.

The poll found that 95 percent of Lebanese were concerned that the fighting in Syria would spread into their country, while 80 percent of Jordanians and 62 percent of Turks shared the same fear.

Eighty percent of Lebanese opposed the West arming the "rebels," with even 66 percent of the country's Sunnis against such action. Sixty-eight percent of Turks opposed the West providing arms, as did 60 percent of Tunisians and 59 percent of Egyptians. Only in Jordan was a slight majority of 53 percent in favor.

The poll follows an earlier survey in the US showing that 62 percent of the American population opposes any intervention in Syria, and only 25 percent support it.

These surveys point to the hostility to war among the peoples of the region, in the US and around the globe. From the experiences of the last decade, millions are coming to the understanding that behind the pretenses about "human rights," "democracy" and "terrorism," US imperialism and its allies are engaged in predatory military aggression that inevitably leads to mass slaughter.

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