

## US, NATO Prepare Syria Intervention

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Global Research, March 20, 2013

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

The top US commander in Europe told a Senate hearing Tuesday that the US military and NATO are drawing up plans for direct military intervention in Syria.

Adm. James Stavridis, head of the Pentagon's European Command, speaking at a hearing by the Senate Armed Service Committee, said that the US military is "looking at a variety of options" and is "prepared if called upon to be engaged."

Declaring that there was "no end in sight to a vicious civil war," Stavridis told the panel that "the option of assisting the opposition forces in Syria in ways that would break the deadlock are being actively explored by NATO members," the *Washington Post* reported.

The admiral added that US and NATO discussions have included providing "lethal support" to the anti-government militias and using direct military force to impose "no-fly zones" in Syria and enforce "arms embargoes" against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Asked by committee chairman Senator Carl Levin (Democrat, Michigan) whether the discussions included "going after Syria's air defenses," Stavridis answered "Yes," to which Levin replied, "Good."

The exchange on Capitol Hill mirrored other developments signaling an escalation of the intervention by the Western powers, utilizing a bitter sectarian civil war to bring about regime change in Syria.

Both Britain and France have called for an emergency meeting of European Union foreign ministers this week on their demand for lifting an EU arms embargo that bars members states from directly shipping weapons to the Western-backed "rebels."

Both Prime Minister David Cameron in London and President François Hollande in Paris have indicated that they are prepared to act unilaterally if the EU fails to bow to their demand. Germany, while carrying out its own intervention in Syria, has voiced opposition to the lifting of the ban, warning that it will escalate the bloodshed, risk arming Al Qaeda-linked forces, and potentially spread violence throughout the region.

Washington, meanwhile, has signaled its support for British and French moves to directly arm the anti-Assad forces. On Monday, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that "the United States does not stand in the way of other countries that made a decision to provide arms, whether it's France or Britain or others."

In reality, the Obama administration has been intimately involved in the operations to ship arms to the Syrian anti-regime militias, setting up a CIA station near the Syrian-Turkish border to coordinate arms and aid pouring in from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey

and Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this month, Washington announced that it was providing its own “non-lethal” aid to these forces, including military rations, medical kits and other gear. At the same time, it has been widely reported that US special operations troops are training anti-Assad militiamen in Jordan. The Syrian government reported this week that a force of some 300 such US-trained fighters had crossed the Jordanian border into Syria.

The bulk of the fighting against Syrian government forces, however, is being carried out by Islamist militias, the most prominent among them Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate that Washington has formally designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

The Syrian government reported that on Tuesday morning Western-backed insurgents fired a rocket carrying a chemical weapon into the village of Khan al-Asal near the northern city of Aleppo, killing 25 people and wounding 110. The Syrian foreign ministry issued a statement calling the attack a “dangerous escalation,” recalling its earlier warnings that such weapons could be provided to the anti-regime forces with the aim of blaming their use on the Syrian government and providing a pretext for Western intervention.

US President Barack Obama has issued repeated statements calling the use of chemical weapons or the threat that they would fall into the hands of terrorists a “red line” that could prompt direct US intervention in Syria.

Spokesmen for anti-Assad opposition forces blamed the attack on Syrian military. However, there is no question that the rocket was fired into an area controlled by the government, landing near a Syrian army installation. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is aligned with the opposition, put the number of dead at 26, claiming that 16 of them were soldiers. Those injured in the attack were taken to government hospitals in Aleppo suffering from respiratory problems.

A Reuters photographer on the scene reported that people “were suffocating in the streets and the air smelt strongly of chlorine.”

The Obama administration brushed aside the incident, with the White House saying it had “no evidence” that any attack had taken place. A State Department spokeswoman dismissed it as nothing more than “the regime’s continued attempts to discredit the legitimate opposition and distract from its own atrocities committed against the Syrian people.”

In other words, atrocities carried out by Western-backed forces in Syria will be ignored.

Referring to Tuesday’s attack, Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi described it as “the first act by the government announced in Istanbul.”

He was referring to the meeting convened Monday by the Syrian National Coalition, a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated front cobbled together last November under the direction of the US State Department. The gathering, consisting of a total of 63 people, chose Ghassan Hitto, a naturalized American citizen and IT business executive from Texas who left Syria more than 30 years ago, as “prime minister” of what the front is calling an “interim government.”

Hitto follows in the footsteps of Abdurraheem el-Keib, installed as Libya's prime minister following the US-NATO war for regime change in that country. Like Hitto, Keib was also a US citizen with close ties to the oil industry, who had been out of Libya for 35 years.

Whether this self-proclaimed government will have any standing whatsoever inside Syria is a matter of considerable doubt. The various Islamist militias that have seized control of territory have shown little inclination to bow to the exiles of the Syrian National Coalition. It can, however, act as a cat's-paw for Western intervention, serving to block any negotiated end to the civil war and potentially obtaining direct military and financial support for its installation on Syrian soil.

Nothing could more graphically expose the real nature of the so-called "Syrian revolution," whose leadership is being shaped directly by the US State Department.

It also lays bare the reactionary role played by a coterie of pseudo-left groups ranging from the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France to the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, the Left Party in Germany and the International Socialist Organization in the United States. All of them have sought to cast these sordid maneuvers and the bloody sectarian war for regime change as a social revolution, in which imperialist intervention can serve to further human rights and social progress.

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