

War in the Middle East? Washington Escalates Syria Intervention

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The US and Jordanian militaries have stepped up a secret program to train thousands of armed fighters to send into Syria with the apparent aim of carving out a buffer zone in the south of the country.

Citing unnamed US and Jordanian officials, the *Washington Post* reported Wednesday that Washington has ordered the training of some 3,000 officers for the so-called Syrian rebels to be completed sooner than originally planned. The aim is to finish the training program by the end of this month to exploit advances made by anti-government militias along Syria's 230-mile border with Jordan.

Last October it was revealed that the Pentagon had dispatched a 150-strong special operations task force to Jordan. At the time, the *New York Times* reported that "the idea of establishing a buffer zone between Syria and Jordan—which would be enforced by Jordanian forces on the Syrian side of the border—had been discussed in conjunction with the setting up of the US military outpost, located near the Syrian border."

On Wednesday, anti-regime forces reportedly captured an air defense base on the outskirts of the southwestern Syrian city of Daraa, just miles from the Jordanian border. Earlier, they seized the main border crossing between the two countries, along with two military outposts and a stretch of highway leading to Damascus.

The Jordanian monarchy backs a buffer zone largely as a matter of self-preservation. It fears the Syrian civil war will spill over the border threatening its own rule. There are already some 470,000 Syrian refugees in the country and concern is growing within the Jordanian regime that the Islamist elements unleashed against the government of Bashir al-Assad will seek to bring about regime change in Jordan as well.

This is part of a wider phenomenon, in which the Western-backed sectarian civil war in Syria is crossing various frontiers. Reports from Lebanon Wednesday indicated that a Syrian attack helicopter fired a missile into an area used as a staging ground for fighters and weapons being sent into the civil war across the border. Sectarian fighting between Sunni and Shia factions has also broken out in Lebanon's second city, Tripoli.

And in Iraq, a government spokesman reported that the Syrian conflict had turned its border area into "a nest of terrorist cells." Stepped up fighting by al Qaeda-associated elements in Syria has been accompanied by a wave of terrorist bombings in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

“Creation of a buffer zone would aim to convert areas now in rebel hands into permanent havens or thousands of army defectors and displaced civilians in the area,” the *Post* reports. In other words, the Jordanian regime would seek to push refugees back across the border into these “havens.”

According to the *Post*, members of the Jordanian parliament have demanded the sealing of the country’s border with Syria and the creation of the buffer zones. “It’s not one of the potential solutions available—it has become the only realistic solution to avoid a larger crisis in Jordan,” a member of parliament told the newspaper.

The *Post* cites both American and Jordanian officials to the effect that the principal “stumbling block” to establishing the buffer zones has been the refusal of Washington to provide “air cover.” Such action would require a massive US intervention, including the bombing of Syria’s air defenses, communications facilities and other sites.

There are growing demands in American ruling circles that the Obama administration initiate such attacks. This was the content of an opinion piece by former US senator from Connecticut and Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman, published in the *Wall Street Journal* Wednesday. Lieberman demanded a “campaign of US-led airstrikes to neutralize Assad’s planes, helicopters and ballistic missiles.”

Lieberman argued that “vital national interests are at stake in Syria” and that intervention was necessary to counter the growing influence of al Qaeda, which he attributed to Syrian anger over Washington’s failure to take direct military action to topple the Assad regime.

The reality, substantiated by multiple reports from Syria, is that the so-called rebels are dominated by Sunni Islamists, including the al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, which has been credited with making the bulk of the gains registered in combat with government forces.

These forces have reportedly received the lion’s share of arms and aid flowing from the Persian Gulf Sunni monarchies, coordinated by the CIA, which has established a covert station for that purpose in Turkey.

While the Obama administration has formally categorized the Nusra front as a foreign terrorist organization, its real attitude has been one of tacit support for the Islamist group’s actions, which have included terrorist car bombings and other attacks on civilians.

And, while US officials have voiced concerns about al Qaeda-affiliated forces gaining a foothold on Syria’s border with Israel, Tel Aviv itself appears to be giving tacit backing to these elements. This was made clear by the chief of the Israeli defense ministry’s diplomatic security bureau, Amos Gil’ad, who in an interview with the Israeli media downplayed any danger from al Qaeda. “It is not the same threat as one posed by Iran, Syria and Hezbollah,” he declared. The advance of the al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria, he added, “is a blow to Iran and Hezbollah together.”

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, who enjoys close ties to US intelligence, cites an “order of battle” prepared by the Free Syrian Army for the US State Department. It shows, he said, that “most of the rebel groups have strong Islamic roots.”

As a result, he warns, “the post-Assad situation may be as chaotic and dangerous as the civil war itself. The Muslim rebel groups will try to claim control of Assad’s powerful arsenal, including chemical weapons, posing new dangers.”

He reports that the document received by the State Department describes two almost identically named Islamist fronts, one backed by Saudi Arabia and the other by “wealthy Saudi, Kuwaiti and other Gulf Arab individuals,” as well as a third “rebel group” funded by the monarchical regime in Qatar.

The al Qaeda-linked Nusra front is said to number some 6,000 fighters.

Ignatius suggests that US strategy is to pressure the Saudi regime to push the Islamist front it backs into an alliance with the Turkey-based Free Syrian Army and its US-backed commander, Gen. Salim Idriss.

“That would bring a measure of order and would open the way for Idriss to negotiate a military transition government that would include reconcilable elements of Assad’s army,” Ignatius writes.

This scenario provides a revealing glimpse of Washington’s strategy for the Syrian “revolution.” After using al Qaeda and similar forces as shock troops in a war for regime change, its intent is to fashion a new dictatorial regime based upon the remnants of Assad’s security forces and fully subordinated to US imperialism’s predatory aims in the region.

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