

Russia warns US, allies planning for war in Syria

Niall Green
13 January 2012

Amid intensifying fighting inside Syria itself and rising international tensions in the Middle East, Russian defense officials are warning that the United States and its allies are on the verge of launching a war with Syria.

“We are getting information that NATO members and some Persian Gulf states, operating according to the ‘Libya scenario,’ intend to move from indirect intervention in Syrian affairs to direct military intervention,” Nikolai Patrushev, the Kremlin’s chief national security advisor said in an interview with Russia’s *Kommersant* newspaper Thursday.

Unlike last year’s NATO-led war against Libya, Patrushev claimed, military strikes against Syria “will not be by France, the UK or Italy, but possibly by neighboring Turkey, which was until recently on good terms with Syria but is a rival of Iran with immense ambitions.”

The US and Turkey already have detailed plans for coordinated attacks on Syria, the Russian official claimed, including establishing a no-fly zone to provide cover for Western-backed Syrian fighters hostile to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. These include the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, both based in Turkey.

“Syria has not become an object of interest for a new coalition of the willing in itself,” he noted. “The plan is to punish Damascus not so much for repressing the opposition as for its unwillingness to sever its friendly relations with Iran.”

A spokesman for NATO, the US-led military alliance, has denied these claims. However, it is clear that Washington has stepped up its diplomatic offensive and military plans against Damascus and its ally in Tehran.

The US has bolstered its already massive military presence in the region. The Pentagon announcing that

another aircraft carrier battle group will sail for the Middle East, in addition to the carrier group already scheduled for deployment.

The US also maintains air and naval bases in Europe capable of striking Syria and Iran; it has also armed its allies in the Persian Gulf with the latest hi-tech weaponry. In addition to a recent \$60 billion arms deal with the Saudi monarchy, Washington has also announced the provision of 200 Patriot missiles to Kuwait and \$3.5 billion worth of missiles and missile delivery systems to the United Arab Emirates.

This is also stoking a confrontation between the US and Russia in the region. Moscow and also Beijing are anxious to maintain their economic and strategic ties with Syria and Iran, where billions of dollars of investments and trade deals are on the line. Russia’s only Mediterranean naval base is located in the Syrian port of Tartus, moreover—a facility that the Kremlin has recently upgraded.

Moscow has just dispatched the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and its battle group to the Syrian coast. The Associated Press also reported Wednesday that a Russian ship carrying “tens of tons” of munitions and other equipment bound for Syria was temporarily impounded by authorities in Cyprus before continuing on.

These tensions are rising amid continuing violence inside Syria itself. What began in the spring of 2011 as large-scale protests against dictatorship and social inequality in Syria—mass demonstrations inspired by the revolutionary developments in Egypt and Tunisia—have been overtaken by fighting between Syrian security forces and Western-backed armed opposition groups.

On January 11 Gilles Jacquier, a cameraman working for France2 television, was killed on a government-

authorized visit to the city of Homs—a center of military opposition to the Assad regime. CBS reporters also allowed into Homs by the Assad regime reported ongoing fighting there, with the military hospital admitting roughly 25 newly wounded Syrian soldiers each day.

On January 10 Assad gave a national address blaming “foreign conspiracies” for the violence in Syria, vowing to “strike with an iron fist” against political opponents inside Syria. This followed two bomb blasts last week in the capital, Damascus, which has largely refrained from joining the Western-backed armed rebellion.

Furthering its plans to isolate and overthrow the Assad regime, Washington is also pressuring the Arab League to halt its monitoring mission in Syria. The Arab League, dominated by pro-US regimes such as the Saudi monarchy and the Egyptian military junta, agreed in December to send representatives to Syria to monitor civil conflict there. This followed the provocative suspension of Damascus from the league, citing its repression of opposition forces.

However, the league’s monitoring mission—presented as a means to halt violence in the country and lead to Syria’s full re-admittance to the Arab organization—failed to produce the “smoking gun” that Washington and its allies had hoped could be used to justify a military intervention.

After the withdrawal of Syrian armed forces from many of the centers of urban fighting, various pro-Western Arab leaders condemned the mission. Echoing the line of Washington, they demanded further concessions from Damascus.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, speaking to reporters this week, said that he could not envisage a successful Arab League mission in Syria. After talks with her Qatari counterpart, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated al-Thani’s remarks Wednesday, telling reporters in Doha that the Arab League mission to Syria should come to an end.

The Obama administration is engaged in a round of intense diplomacy with its Middle Eastern allies. As well as Secretary Clinton’s tour of the region (where she also stopped in the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Oman), President Barack Obama held talks with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal at the White House this week. These regimes have long sought to

pressure the Assad regime to break its close ties with Iran.

Turkey has increased its military presence along the Syrian border, and the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stated that it will take all steps to secure its interests, including setting up and enforcing military exclusion zones within Syria—a move that would amount to seizing Syrian territory and declaring war against Damascus.

This week, the Free Syrian Army, made up of defectors from the Syrian armed forces, called on Ankara to implement a no fly zone along the Turkish-Syrian border and for Jordan to do the same along its northern frontier, in order to let the group move more of its fighters into Syria.

Stoking these regional tensions to further its own hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East, Washington is looking to Turkey, the Arab League and the GCC to further isolate Syria and, ultimately, replace the Assad government with a puppet regime that will break off relations with Tehran and turn the country into a base for US intrigues in the region.

As such, Washington has no interest in halting the bloodshed in Syria. Rather, the escalation of the conflict furthers the efforts of the US and its allies to unseat the Assad regime, while sowing sectarian divisions to divide the Syrian working class and oppressed masses.



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