

US, Egyptian junta seek to arm Syrian opposition

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On Monday, Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham met for talks with generals of the US-backed Egyptian military junta and leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. Both senators are members of the Senate Armed Services Committee and call for arming the Syrian opposition and for regime-change in Damascus.

The Egyptian junta, which is drowning the Egyptian revolution in blood and remains the main ally of US imperialism in the Arab world, backs US preparations for imperialist intervention in Syria. Last week, high-ranking US officials declared that the \$1.3 billion in yearly US military aid to Egypt would not be cut, despite a conflict over US-sponsored NGOs operating in Egypt.

While in Kabul, shortly before visiting Cairo, McCain argued for arming the Syrian rebels via “third world countries” and Graham said that the Cairo-based Arab League could be a “conduit” for US influence in Syria. They insisted that it was “the duty and not the privilege of free nations to come to the rescue of the Syrian people who are being massacred by the Assad regime.”

In Cairo, McCain gave an interview to CBS News, stressing the need to arm and give technical assistance to the Syrian rebels. McCain compared the situation to last year’s NATO war in Libya, stating: “For example, in Libya, without our direct involvement, there was arms that were obtained by the Libyan rebels. One of the ideas that’s been floated is a kind of sanctuary that would allow people to train and equip. We don’t need to do that directly. But I think that there are ways to get arms to the resistance and the Turks and the Arab

League can play a great, a very significant role.”

The comparison to Libya is significant. The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt helped to prepare the imperialist war against Libya. SCAF reportedly supplied arms to the Western-backed Libyan rebels in coordination with Washington even before NATO forces began to bomb Libya on March 19. As the US is preparing a military confrontation with Syria, Washington is again requesting the services of the Egyptian junta.

As before the war against Libya, the junta is not officially calling for foreign intervention—due to widespread hostility to imperialist wars among the Egyptian masses—but it is supporting the US-led isolation of the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. On Sunday, Egypt removed its ambassador to Syria, a step immediately applauded by the US government. This came shortly after the pro-Western regimes in Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia cut their diplomatic ties with Damascus.

The alignment of the Egyptian junta with US imperialism against Syria comes only some days before a so-called “Friends of Syria” conference in Tunis scheduled for Friday. It is already clear that the meeting aims to lay the basis for regime-change and military intervention in Syria. The host of the meeting, Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem of the Islamist Ennahda party, said on Monday that “there must be radical political change in Syria.” He added: “We believe that on the 24th of this month, we shall send a strong message to the Syrian government.”

Abdessalem also said that “the Syrian National

Council (SNC) and other opposition groups will be represented at the Tunis meeting.” The SNC is an amalgam of CIA assets, Islamic fundamentalists and former officials of the Assad regime. It calls for military aid to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the armed wing of the Syrian “rebels”. The FSA was founded on Turkish territory but is engaged in attacks on government installations inside Syria and assassinations of Syrian officials.

In recent days, some voices within leading US circles have been questioning whether the US should arm the FSA. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, declared on Sunday that it was “premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria,” citing “indications that Al Qaeda is involved” in some armed actions against the Assad regime.

On Tuesday, however, officials at the White House and the State Department made renewed calls for unspecified measures against Assad. White House spokesman Jay Carney said, “We don’t want to take actions that would contribute to the further militarisation of Syria, because that could take the country down a dangerous path. But we don’t rule out additional measures.”

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said that Washington was concentrating on political efforts, but added: “That said ... if we can’t get Assad to yield to the pressure that we are all bringing to bear, we may have to consider additional measures.”

Neither Carney nor Nuland elaborated exactly on what “additional measures” should be taken. An Associated Press report on Wednesday based on anonymous US government sources indicated that the US is preparing military action behind the scenes. It stated, “To maintain the pressure against Assad, Washington is trying to keep as many countries as possible involved in the international coordination against Syria’s government—even if there is no consensus on arming the rebels.”

The AP article continues that the meeting in Tunis “will seek to clarify some of the confusion. The US is

trying to get a clearer picture of what promises countries such as Syria’s Arab neighbours are making to elements of the opposition, which rebels each government might support and some agreement on what types of assistance would be helpful or damaging.”

McCain laid out his preferred course of action more bluntly. In the CBS interview he declared that the Syrian rebels “need training, they need equipment,” for example “anti-tank weapons and other means to equalize the unequal situation on the battlefield.” His remarks made clear that the US drive to war against Syria would also target Washington’s major regional and global rivals. McCain complained that “the Iranians are already supplying arms and equipment to Bashar al-Assad, as are the Russians. Right now it’s an asymmetric situation [...] and the Syrian rebels are not receiving equal assistance.”

Iran and Russia, the two countries that have the closest relations with Syria, along with China, are excluded from the “Friends of Syria” conference on Friday in Tunis. China and Russia recently vetoed a UN Security Council resolution against Syria aimed at providing a pseudo-legal cover for a Libyan-style military intervention.



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