

Pentagon prepares war plans for Syria

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In testimony before a Senate committee Wednesday, the Pentagon's civilian and uniformed chiefs confirmed that they are drawing up war plans against Syria at the request of the Obama White House.

The statements by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey came amid mounting evidence that Washington and its key European allies, working in conjunction with the right-wing monarchical regimes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are escalating a covert intervention aimed at bringing about Syrian regime-change.

Much of the media coverage of Wednesday's hearing focused on the jingoistic intervention of Arizona's Senator John McCain, the former Republican presidential candidate. He is demanding US air strikes against Syria to carve out "safe havens" in which Western-backed armed groups can prepare military strikes against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"How many additional civilian lives would have to be lost in order to convince you that the military measures of the kind we are proposing necessary to end the killing and force Assad to leave power?" McCain demanded of Panetta.

The defense secretary responded by asserting, "We are not divided here." He insisted that the Pentagon is "reviewing all possible additional steps that can be taken" to hasten the downfall of the Assad regime, "including potential military options if necessary."

General Dempsey cautioned that a US intervention in Syria would be more difficult than the NATO war in Libya given the country's "far different demographic, ethnic, religious mix." However, he assured the Senate panel, "Should we be called upon to defend US interests, we will be ready." The Joint Chiefs chairman added that military operations under consideration

included the imposition of a "no-fly zone," the opening up of a "humanitarian corridor," a naval blockade of the Syrian coastline and air strikes.

Panetta and Dempsey both echoed statements made the day before at a White House press briefing by President Obama that it would be a "mistake" to "take military action unilaterally."

None of them, however, raised a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing use of military force as a pre-condition for US military intervention in Syria.

An unnamed senior Defense Department official made it clear to CNN that the administration does not see a UN resolution—which has so far been blocked by Russia and China, which both wield veto power on the Security Council—as indispensable. "Some kind of mandate from a regional organization" would suffice, the official indicated, or any multi-lateral cover for US intervention, such as the "coalition of the willing" the Bush administration cobbled together before the Iraq war.

Particularly important in this regard is Turkey, which is hosting a conference of the "Friends of Syria" this month. While formally opposing a military intervention by any military force "from outside the region," Turkey has called for Assad's downfall and demanded that Syria allow the opening up of "humanitarian aid corridors."

Similarly, the United Nations has prepared a 90-day "emergency contingency plan" to deliver food aid to Syrian civilians. The US State Department seized on the plan, demanding "immediate, safe and unhindered access" to all "affected areas" in Syria.

In response, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said that his government would resist any foreign intervention. "Humanitarian corridors mean military corridors," he said. "You can't have humanitarian corridors without military protection."

During his testimony, Panetta was asked whether the US would provide “communications equipment” to the armed groups seeking to topple the Assad government. Panetta responded that he would “prefer to discuss that in a closed session,” while allowing that the administration is “considering an array of non-lethal assistance.”

In fact, there are multiple reports indicating that the US administration has already gone well beyond that.

In a report on Tuesday, *Foreign Policy* cited senior administration officials confirming that a meeting of the Deputies Committee of the National Security Council had already adopted a policy “for expanding US engagement with Syrian activists and providing them with the means to organize themselves.”

“US policy is now aligned with enabling the opposition to overthrow the Assad regime,” one official told the journal. “This codifies a significant change in our Syria policy.”

This official added that steps are being taken to support the military committee formed recently by the Syrian National Council, which Washington sees as a more reliable puppet force than the Free Syrian Army. “There is recognition that lethal assistance to the opposition may be necessary, but not at this time,” he said.

However, an email released by WikiLeaks as part of the internal documents obtained from the private US intelligence firm Stratfor indicates that such “lethal assistance” has been in place for months.

The December 2011 email was from Reva Bhalla, Stratfor’s director of analysis. It recounts a meeting with military intelligence officers at the Pentagon, including one British and one French officer. The officers, part of the US Air Force’s strategic studies group, suggested that “SOF [special operations forces] teams are already on the ground focused on reconnaissance mission and training opposition forces.”

The officers, according to Bhalla, said that the aim of the special forces teams was to “commit guerrilla attacks, assassination campaigns, try to break the back of the Alawite forces, elicit collapse from within.”

The day before Panetta’s and Dempsey’s appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Marine Gen. James Mattis, the head of US Central Command (Centcom) in charge of all US forces in the Middle

East, addressed the same panel and gave a candid assessment of US aims in Syria.

“If we were to provide options, whatever they are, to hasten the fall of Assad,” Mattis testified, “it would cause a great deal of concern and discontent in Tehran.”

Declaring Iran “the most significant threat in the region,” Mattis added, “It would be the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 20 years, when Assad falls.”

Behind all of Washington’s posturing about defending civilians in Syria, the real methods and aims of US imperialism begin to emerge clearly. It is waging a terrorist campaign in Syria in preparation for more direct military intervention.

It seeks Assad’s overthrow not out of any interest in human rights or democracy, but rather to advance US strategic interests by weakening Iran, Syria’s ally, which Washington views as the principal obstacle to its bid to assert hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Thus, contained within the steadily escalating American intervention in Syria are the preparations for a far wider war, with global consequences.



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