US prepares multi-front proxy war against Syria

Chris Marsden
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Since the *Washington Post*'s May 16 report on an influx of arms to Syrian opposition forces, the Obama administration's plans for a proxy war against Syria have become clearer still.

The *Post* wrote of "significantly more and better weapons" reaching oppositionists, "paid for by Persian Gulf nations [Saudi Arabia and Qatar] and coordinated in part by the United States," based upon a perspective that "an expanding military confrontation is inevitable."

Saudi Arabia and Qatar were sending weapons with approval from Washington, which has "expanded contacts with opposition forces to provide the gulf nations with assessments of rebel credibility and command-and-control infrastructure."

An additional source of weaponry is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has "its own supply channel to the rebels, using resources from wealthy private individuals and money from Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, said Mulham al-Drobi, a member of the Brotherhood's executive committee."

The *Post* concluded by noting, "The Pentagon has prepared options for Syria extending all the way to air assaults to destroy the nation's air defenses."

In the *Daily Telegraph* of May 22, Michael Weiss, Communications Director of the Henry Jackson Society, writes that "Rebel sources in Hatay told me last night that not only is Turkey supplying light arms to select battalion commanders, it is also training Syrians in Istanbul."

He continues, "Men from the unit I was embedded with were vetted and called up by Turkish intelligence in the last few days and large consignments of AK-47s are being delivered by the Turkish military to the Syrian-Turkish border… Material is being stockpiled in Damascus, in Idlib near the Turkish border and in Zabadani on the Lebanese border."

Weiss notes the response to the *Washington Post*'s article by White House spokesman Jay Carney, which hardly amounted to a denial. "We continue to provide non-lethal support to the opposition," he said. "And while I can only speak for the United States, we know that others are pursuing different types of support, and I'd refer you to them to characterise the nature of their actions."

Weiss concludes, "Turkey wouldn't take such a course of action without express American consent or encouragement. Nor do I think that US Senator Joseph Lieberman, who has called for surgical airstrikes and the creation of buffer zones in Syria, would indicate that the administration was inching toward a military response to the humanitarian crisis that Kofi Annan's farcical 'cease-fire' has done nothing to quell unless he was fairly sure it was indeed doing so."

A May 22 *DEBKAfile* exclusive report states, "The Syrian rebels have received their first 'third generation' anti-tank weapons, 9K115-2 Metis-M and Kornet E. They are supplied by Saudi and Qatari intelligence agencies following a secret message from President Barack Obama advising them to up the military stake in the effort to oust Assad."

DEBKAfile, which is close to US neo-conservative sources, describes these shipments as "only one facet of the unfolding US plan for the Syrian crisis… Turkish intelligence has been given the green light to arm Syria rebels with IED roadside bombs tailored for the Syrian theater and intensively train the dissidents in their use at Turkish military facilities." This is tantamount to Ankara's first direct military intervention in Syria.

Turkey has for some time acted as an organising front for imperialist intervention into Syria, aimed at deposing the pro-Iranian regime of Bashar al-Assad. It

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is host to the SNC and its military arm, the Free Syrian Army—which mounts its offensives by passing through Turkey's 910 kilometre border with Syria.

Lebanon and Jordan are also serving as bases to organise the insurgency. There have also been more recent contacts with Kurdish groups that have been reluctant to join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni sectarian elements, seen as beholden to their long-time enemy, Turkey.

As with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, Lebanon's involvement as a proxy force is based on whipping up sectarian hostilities against Shia Iran and Assad's Alawite-based regime—extending the domestic conflict with the Shia-based Hezbollah, which is funded by Tehran and Damascus.

Recent weeks have seen escalating sectarian clashes in Lebanon that have claimed several lives. Fighting reached into the capital, Beirut, following the killing arrest of an anti-Syrian cleric and his bodyguard at a checkpoint in the north of the country and the arrest of Sunni leader Shadi al-Mawlawi, who is now on bail, accused of membership in a terrorist group.

Tensions were heightened further by the kidnapping of 13 Lebanese Shia pilgrims by 40 Free Syrian Army (FSA) gunmen. This caused angry protests in Beirut that were only calmed by the intervention of Hezbollah head, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

In a move again aimed at isolating Iran and Syria and defeating a Shia insurgency in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia is working for the creation of a Gulf union of the six members of the present Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.

Plans for an initial preparatory union of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain provoked thousands of Bahrain's majority Shia population to protest in a demonstration that stretched for three miles. Iran called the proposal "the American plan to annex Bahrain to Saudi Arabia".

Bahrain relies totally on Saudi forces, which entered the state in March last year to crush domestic protests.

Prospects for a broader union were shelved after initial discussions in Riyadh this week chaired by King Abdullah. Prince Saud al-Faisal said a delay was needed in order to "bring all the members and not only two."

The Arab League has thrown its weight behind the plan, warning Iran to halt its media campaign "and provocative statements from Iranian officials" against political and military union of the Gulf States.

"Any union steps between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are a sovereign issue of the two states and other Gulf countries and no other country has the right to interfere in it," said Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby.

Syria is also being hit hard by international sanctions, which have cost its oil sector $4 billion, according to oil minister Sufian Allaw, and led to steep price rises and shortages for its citizens. Syria's gas production covers only half of the country's needs, and prices for a tank of cooking gas have more than quadrupled.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday again warned of an all-out civil war in Syria, should the present supposed peace plan fail.

That same day, Saudi King Abdullah wrote of his being "deeply concerned" about the sectarian violence in Lebanon. In a letter to President Michel Sulaiman, he warned, "Due to the gravity of the crisis and the possibility of it causing sectarian strife in Lebanon and putting it back in the shadow of the civil war, we are looking at your ... attempts to interfere to end the crisis... and keeping Lebanon away from foreign struggles especially with the Syrian crisis nearby."

All such statements are a cynical pose. The UN is well aware that Washington is pursuing a deliberate policy of destabilisation in Syria in order to justify a war for regime change waged by its allies—above all in Riyadh, Ankara and Doha—with Washington's military support. With the broader efforts now being made to forge a Sunni-based alliance of anti-Iranian states, this could yet ignite a full-scale regional war with devastating consequences.

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