

# US military lobbies for war with Syria

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Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey told reporters on Thursday that the Obama administration's continued pursuit of diplomatic solutions in Syria has put military planners in the Pentagon in a strategic bind.

Complaining of a "lack of focus," he declared that with a clear instruction for regime change, "I can build you a plan, and I know how many divisions, I know how many air wings ... it takes."

This is the second time Dempsey has gone on record to threaten military action. Speaking following the alleged May 25 massacre of over 100 people at Houla, he went on Fox News to declare, "Of course, there is always a military option ... it may come to a point with Syria because of the atrocities."

The Houla massacre was immediately blamed on the regime of Bashar al-Assad and attributed to shelling by his troops. Within days, however, investigations proved that most deaths had been the result of summary executions from shootings at close range and stabbings. Opposition forces blamed pro-government Alawite Shabiha militia, while the government blamed terrorists associated with the Sunni insurgency seeking to destabilise the United Nations ceasefire on the eve of a visit to Syria by Kofi Annan.

Once again, Dempsey utilised an alleged massacre as a platform for his warmongering—joining a Republican lobby led by Senator John McCain and Senator Joe Lieberman, a former Democrat, urging the direct arming of the Syrian opposition and US air support.

The massacre this time is reported to have taken place in the village of Qubair, 20 kilometres from Hama, on Wednesday. But such details as are available are even murkier and more open to question than was Houla. Initial reports spoke of anywhere between 87 and 100 dead, over half women and children. It was supposed to have followed the same pattern as Houla—heavy shelling preceding an attack by Shabiha militia.

This casualty figure has since been revised down to "at least 55 people," according to the pro-opposition UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The victims are, it said, mostly from the same Al-Yateem family, including 18 women and children.

Footage purportedly from Mazraat al-Qubeir shows the bodies of what the cameraman states are a dozen women and children, as well as the remains of burned corpses. An anonymous activist claims that the bodies of between 25 and 30 men were taken away by the killers.

The Syrian government has again rejected such accounts, putting the death toll in the town at nine and blaming terrorist groups seeking to promote military intervention on the eve of Thursday's report to the UN General Assembly by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby. This report is to be followed by a closed-door briefing of the UN Security Council.

At the general assembly, Syria's permanent representative, Dr. Bashar al-Jaafari, said that the massacre was committed five hours before any clashes happened, and that the images broadcast by Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were not those of massacre victims. "The instigative media channels have taken to airing such fabrications before the UN Security Council meetings," he said.

Al-Jaafari said that local people had affirmed that the gunmen who committed the crime came from another nearby village. "What is taking place in some parts of Syria is an unjustifiable heinous massacre, but countries supporting terrorists and facilitating their crimes in Syria are complicit in the bloodshed," he said. "Are suicide bombings that targeted Syria acts in self-defence? Are attacks on hospitals, medical staffs and schools democratic aspects?"

Dempsey's chivvying of the Obama administration does not reflect a fundamental difference over strategy

between the Pentagon and the White House. Obama is as much a blood-soaked war criminal as Dempsey. The administration wants regime change in Syria, achieved firstly by destabilisation and then possibly some form of proxy war waged by its allies, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. But it has to confront and neutralise the opposition of Russia, China, India and other states.

At the UN, Annan declared that his own peace plan “is not being implemented.” He told the Security Council that it was time to threaten “consequences” if Assad did not halt the strife, stating to reporters that other actions must be considered “if the plan is not working, or if we decide it’s not the way to go.”

Ban Ki-moon joined in blaming the Assad regime. “For many months, it has been evident that President Assad and his government have lost all legitimacy,” he said. “The trail of blood leads back to those responsible.”

As the UN met, in Washington US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was hosting a meeting of representatives from 55 countries, with the aim of imposing additional punitive sanctions that would force the Syrian business elite to abandon the Assad regime. “Strong sanctions make clear to the Syrian business community and other supporters of the regime that their future is bleak so long as the Assad regime remains in power,” he said.

In Istanbul Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was taking part in a mini “Friends of Syria” meeting of foreign ministers and envoys from 16 European, Turkish and Arab countries held to discuss their plans for regime change. Clinton insisted that Assad must go and “transfer power” to an “interim representative government”. Her proposal is directed at winning support from Russia’s Vladimir Putin for a negotiated regime change like that organised in Yemen.

Though such an outcome is not excluded, Moscow remains at present opposed to what it recognises as a US attempt to bring Syria into its orbit, isolate Iran and secure its undisputed hegemony over the Middle East at the expense of Russia and China.

On Thursday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said of the reported massacre at Qubair, “There is no doubt that certain forces once again used vicious and despicable provocations to frustrate Kofi Annan’s plan.”

“It is imperative that the foreign players who are

taking part in settling the Syrian problem use their channels to influence the armed opposition groups, whose increased recent activity and calls for outside intervention contradict this plan,” he continued.

Russia and China both reiterated their opposition to military intervention at the UN, with Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping stating, “You can’t say that because you dislike a country’s system you can then think of ways to overturn its government.”

Russia’s representative to the UN, Vitali Churkin, opposed unilateral pressure on Syria and sanctions, urging instead that the supply of weapons and money to the opposition be stopped.

Moscow and Beijing were backed by India, whose representative, Hardeep Singh Puri, expressed concern at escalating attacks against both civilians and security forces.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters in Beijing on Wednesday that Moscow is proposing an international conference seeking to persuade all Syrian opposition groups to end violence and sit down for talks. This would involve the permanent members of the UN Security Council, Turkey, Iran, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the European Union.

He has the backing of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, comprising Russia, China and the Central Asian states Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which Thursday called for a negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict and rejected any “enforced handover of power”. Alongside economic cooperation, the SCO is pledged to military cooperation, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism operations. Its intervention into the Syrian crisis is another sign of how the US drive for regime change threatens a wider war in the region.



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