

US Defense Secretary Panetta threatens Syria, Iran in Middle East tour

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31 July 2012

Beginning his week-long Middle East tour in Tunis yesterday, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta called for regime change in Syria and threatened Iran with sanctions and war.

Panetta will visit the Tunisian Islamist regime of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali of the Ennadha Party, as well as Egypt's Islamist President Mohammed Mursi and Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the leader of the US-backed Egyptian military junta. Panetta will then continue on to visit Israel and King Abdullah in Jordan.

Panetta's trip aims to deepen the US military's ties to the Islamist regimes that have come to power after the mass working class uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, while pursuing Washington's deepening military intervention throughout the region.

In Tunis, the Tunisian capital, Panetta discussed closer collaboration between US and Tunisian counter-terrorism officials in tracking Al Qaeda-linked forces in Mali. Allied to Tuareg forces that fled from Libya to neighboring Mali after NATO overthrew Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi last year, these groups now control much of northern Mali, which rebelled against the central government in Bamako.

Panetta threatened Iran, repeating the Obama administration's usual threat that "all options," including war, are "on the table."

Over the weekend, US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon also reportedly briefed Israeli officials on US contingency plans for raids on Iranian nuclear facilities and war with Iran, if Tehran does not give up its nuclear program.

Panetta also suggested, however, that current international sanctions might force Iran to negotiate a deal acceptable to Washington. US and European Union (EU) sanctions have cut Iranian oil exports by an

estimated 40 percent. The Iranian currency has lost roughly half its value against the dollar, impoverishing Iranian workers by sharply pushing up prices of imported goods, including food.

Panetta explained, "These sanctions are having a serious impact in terms of the economy of Iran. And while the results of that may not be obvious at the moment, the fact is that they have expressed a willingness to negotiate, and they continue to seem interested in trying to find a diplomatic solution."

Stepping back from his assessment earlier this year that Israel was "likely" to attack in the spring of 2012, he said Israel had "not made any decisions on Iran."

Panetta also threatened a key Iranian ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose regime now faces a US-backed Sunni insurgency that has dragged Syria into civil war.

As Panetta spoke in Tunis, fighting flared in the key city of Aleppo in northern Syria, where army units attacked anti-Assad militias that had seized several key areas and set up check points. Army units assaulted the Salah al-Din and Sakhur neighborhoods. "Rebel" forces reportedly also seized a check point in Anadan, which would give them control of a direct route from Aleppo to the border with Turkey, which supports and arms anti-Assad forces.

Red Cross/Red Crescent officials claimed that 200,000 people have fled fighting in Aleppo.

Calling for international efforts to "bring Assad down," Panetta said: "If they continue this kind of tragic attack on their own people in Aleppo, I think it will ultimately be a nail in Assad's own coffin. What Assad has been doing to his own people and what he continues to do to his own people makes clear that his regime is coming to an end. It's lost all legitimacy. It's no longer a question of whether he's coming to an end,

it's when."

Panetta's reference to Assad's "coffin," coming from a government that oversaw the overthrow and eventual killing of Gaddafi last year, was certainly intended as a quite deliberate threat of assassination.

At the same time, Washington—which has until now maintained the fiction that it is not arming the rebels, by claiming that weapons are being provided by US allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar—took a step closer to openly arming them Sunday. Reuters reported that the White House has drawn up a confidential presidential directive, or "finding," authorizing greater covert assistance to the Syrian "rebels."

The French government also reportedly plans to request a meeting of the UN Security Council this week to discuss Syria and "exert pressure" on the Assad regime.

Panetta's trip reflects the Pentagon's reorganization of its Middle East operations to defend US imperialist interests in the Middle East. It is seeking to deepen its ties to right-wing Islamist parties that came to power after last year's mass working class uprisings overthrew US-backed secular dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt. At the same time, it is forcibly intervening to topple any regime, like Syria or Iran, that stands in the way of US regional interests.

The arguments of Panetta—that the US is fighting Al Qaeda, or seeking to prevent Assad from killing "his own people"—are cynical and false. In fact, as part of its collaboration with Sunni Islamist regimes like the Saudi and Qatari monarchies, it is relying to a large extent on Al Qaeda forces to mobilize foreign Islamist fighters to infiltrate Syria and attack the Syrian army.

In the *Wall Street Journal*, former US Special Operations Command advisor Seth Jones wrote: "Al Qaeda in Syria (often operating as the 'Al Nusra Front for the People of the Levant') is using traffickers—some ideologically aligned, some motivated by money—to secure routes through Turkey and Iraq for foreign fighters, most of whom are from the Middle East and North Africa. A growing number of donors from the Persian Gulf and Levant appear to be sending financial support, according to US Treasury Department officials."

Jones added that Al Qaeda operatives in Iraq were providing "rifles, light machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades" as well as expertise on bomb-

making to US-backed forces in Syria.

The US operation to overthrow the Assad regime is destabilizing the entire region. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main Turkish-based anti-Assad force, told the *Guardian* that there were at least four units not affiliated to them operating inside Syria, including a Libyan guerrilla brigade. They added that the total number of independent foreign units in Syria operating against Assad was "likely far higher."

Turkish officials are concerned that Kurdish separatist militias may seize portions of Syria and use them as a base to infiltrate neighboring Kurdish-majority areas in Turkey. Yesterday the *New York Times* cited Turkish officials who said they would "not hesitate to strike in Syria," if Kurdish groups attacked Turkey from inside Syria.

Turkey has sent troops, armored personnel carriers, and missile batteries to reinforce its positions along its border with Syria.

Jordanian officials reportedly are also considering deploying Special Forces units from Jordan into Syria, ostensibly to seize its chemical and biological weapons stocks.



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