

US war threats against Syria as fighting intensifies across Near East

Alex Lantier
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Fighting is intensifying in Syria and throughout the Near East, as US and NATO officials escalate threats against Syria after US President Barack Obama's statement Monday night that Washington is planning for a US invasion of Syria.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland dismissed Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil's subsequent offer of talks, even though Jamil offered to discuss Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's resignation.

Jamil said that Assad's resignation could be discussed during a "national dialogue," as an external attempt to force a president's ouster on the Syrian people would set a "very dangerous precedent." It is hardly clear that the outcome of a "national dialogue" would be favorable to Washington, however, even assuming it could somehow be held in a country torn apart by a US proxy war. A January poll found 55 percent of Syrians support keeping Assad in office.

Nuland dismissed Jamil's offer of negotiations, replying: "Frankly, we didn't see anything terribly new there."

Instead, US officials held what was billed as their first "operational planning" meeting in Turkey for military operations to topple the Assad government.

Senior US officials said they had developed "contingency plans" for US Special Forces units to invade Syria. Their ostensible goal would be to seize Syrian chemical weapons, to prevent them from going to Al Qaeda forces among the US-backed anti-Assad "rebels," or to Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite party allied to the Assad regime and in the ruling March 8 Alliance coalition.

American and Turkish officials discussed Turkish fears of a mass exodus of Syrian refugees, and of Kurdish organizations, like the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), using majority-Kurdish areas of Syria as a

base for military operations inside Turkey. During her last trip to Turkey, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she shared "Turkey's determination that Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists."

After a phone call with Obama yesterday, British Prime Minister David Cameron also said movement of Syria's chemical weapons stocks would be "completely unacceptable" and would force Britain and the US to "revisit their approach so far."

US and European officials effectively dismissed Assad's previous pledges not to use chemical weapons except against foreign invasion, pledges that Russian Foreign Ministry officials told the newspaper *Kommersant* yesterday they found credible. They added that Washington had "firmly warned insurgents not to even come close to chemical weapons storage sites," and that "opposition groups are heeding" US demands.

Yesterday French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian also stated that France was prepared to help enforce a partial no-fly zone in Syria, a measure that would involve shooting down Syrian aircraft in Syrian air space.

The US and its allies are dismissing Assad's attempts to negotiate and continuing to arm Sunni anti-Assad forces. At the same time, they are cynically pushing for war by stoking fears that chemical weapons could be used by Assad—a possibility described as remote even by Western press sources—or that they could end up in the possession of Al Qaeda elements among the US-backed forces.

Dina Esfandiary, a security analyst at the British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), commented: "I don't think Assad will use them. He is well aware it would be the end of his rule. What drives urgency, and what frightens bordering states, is the risk they will fall into the hands of non-state actors, who

would not be as deterrable as Assad.”

Fighting intensified yesterday in Syria, with Syrian tanks and warplanes attacking anti-Assad fighters who had taken positions at Daraya and Moadamiyeh, in the region around the capital, Damascus. There were also reports of heavy fighting in Aleppo, Syria’s second city near the Turkish border, and al-Bukamal on Syria’s eastern border with Iraq.

Press reports on events inside Syria make clear the reactionary character of US imperialism’s proxy war in Syria. It has mobilized right-wing elements against Assad, trapping the working class in a devastating war between the unpopular Assad regime and “rebel” forces that have even less support, especially in Syria’s main centers of population and industry.

Significantly, this is even admitted by the “rebel” forces themselves. Rebel commander Sheikh Tawfik Abu Sleiman said, “Yes, it’s true. Around 70 percent of Aleppo city is with the regime. It has always been this way.”

Commenting on the rebels in Aleppo, the *Guardian* admitted: “Their presence is contested by much of the city’s population. The fighters are not seen here as liberators, but as harbingers of terrible suffering to come.”

UN figures show that at least 1.2 million Syrians have fled their homes, including at least 167,175 Syrians who have fled Syria to Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, or Iraq. This number increases by several thousand each day. The UN puts the number of Syrians requiring humanitarian assistance at 2.5 million people, or over 10 percent of Syria’s population of 23 million.

Fearing that Islamist rulers would emerge from Assad’s fall, as was the case in US-occupied Iraq after 2003, many Syrian Christians have fled to Lebanon after clashes with Islamist “rebels.” A *Los Angeles Times* journalist who spoke to them wrote, “They say they were tired of threats and public taunts of being ‘unbelievers’ and ‘dogs of Assad.’ They recount being forced to attend rallies against Assad, an adherent of the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.”

One woman explained, “If the government opponents had acted peacefully, maybe we would have sided with them. But they were terrible. They looted and robbed.”

Ethnic and sectarian tensions are rising in the entire Near East, in line with expectations that the fall of

Assad would lead to bloody battles in Syria between Kurds, Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians—which would spread throughout the region.

In Lebanon, fighting between Sunni and Alawite forces broke out in the northern city of Tripoli yesterday, breaking a truce agreed to the day before. Sectarian fighting killed 15 in the city in June, and ten people have died in four days of fighting this week.

Washington is further stirring tensions in Lebanon by moving to isolate Hezbollah, which has relied for weaponry on its close ties to the Assad regime and through Syria to Iran. Weakening and isolating Hezbollah is a key goal of US policy in the region and of the war in Syria.

This week US prosecutors in New York City seized \$150 million in Hezbollah funds in a Lebanese bank on drug laundering charges. At the same time, the social network Facebook removed Hezbollah’s pages, citing the US State Department’s designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

In Turkey, which has seen renewed fighting between PKK and army forces in Kurdish areas, Turkish officials are investigating whether Syrian and Iranian intelligence played a role in a recent bombing blamed on the PKK at Gaziantep.

Ten Turkish F-16s also violated Iraqi air space Tuesday, bombing alleged PKK camps in the nearby Zap and Khakurk regions of Iraq.



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