

US tightens military noose around Syria

Bill Van Auken
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Amid an escalating drumbeat about a supposed threat that Syria's government is preparing to use chemical weapons against its own people, Washington has deployed a naval armada off the country's coast.

The USS Eisenhower carrier strike group was sent through the Suez Canal from its deployment in the Persian Gulf earlier this week and has reportedly arrived in the Mediterranean near Syrian shores. The deployment joins that of an amphibious battle group already present in the eastern Mediterranean, consisting of the USS Iwo Jima, the USS New York and the USS Gunston Hall, which together carry a contingent of 2,500 US Marines.

Between the two naval forces, Washington now has 17 warships, 70 fighter-bombers and 10,000 military personnel within close striking distance of Syria. This is in addition to the Air Force's 39th Air Base Wing stationed at the Incirlik base in Turkey together with tens of thousands of US ground troops deployed in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Citing US military sources, the *Times* of London reported Wednesday that Washington is ready to launch a military attack on Syria "within days."

"It won't require major movement to make action happen," an unnamed US official told the British newspaper. "The muscle is already there to be flexed."

Pentagon sources have suggested that an intervention carried out on the pretext of securing Syria's chemical weapons would require some 75,000 troops.

In a further threat of direct US-NATO intervention, NATO governments are moving ahead to implement Tuesday's decision of the NATO foreign ministers conference to deploy Patriot missile batteries on Turkey's border with Syria. Germany's defense and foreign ministers announced a decision to deploy some 400 German troops on the border. Similar detachments will also be sent by the US and the Netherlands.

While Turkey claimed it needed the missiles to defend itself from a supposed threat that Syria would fire missiles carrying chemical weapons towards its border, the Patriot batteries could also be used to impose a de facto "no-fly zone" over northern Syria, allowing the US-backed "rebels" to consolidate control over territory and creating the conditions for the installation of a

Western-backed government on Syrian soil.

US officials have reiterated threats made by President Barack Obama and others in the administration about the government of President Bashar al-Assad crossing a "red line" and facing military action if it uses chemical weapons.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta Thursday described the US administration as "very concerned that as the opposition advances, in particular on Damascus, that the regime might very well consider the use of chemical weapons."

Panetta referred to unspecified intelligence as the cause of these supposed concerns. Media outlets like the *New York Times*, CNN and NBC News have trumpeted this "intelligence," citing unnamed US officials as the sources for vague and often contradictory accounts of developments that have allegedly pointed toward a potential use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Syria's deputy foreign minister, Faisal Maqdad, charged Thursday that the allegation made by the US and other NATO countries about Syria's chemical weapons were designed to create a "pretext for any subsequent interventions."

"Syria stresses again, for the tenth, the hundredth time, that if we had such weapons, they would not be used against its people," said Maqdad in an interview with Lebanon's Al Manar television.

Speaking at the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Washington and its allies of manufacturing the alleged chemical weapons threat.

"As soon as we get these rumors [about chemical weapons] we engage in constructive demarche; when we get confirmation that nothing of that type is happening we share this information with our American colleagues," Lavrov told the media.

There are no grounds to grant any credibility to the claims made by Washington and its media servants in presenting a supposedly imminent threat of a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government as a trigger for war.

To the extent that there is any genuine content to these claims, it was expressed on Wednesday by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who declared that Washington was concerned "that an increasingly desperate Assad regime might turn to chemical

weapons, or might lose control of them to one of the many groups that are now operating within Syria.”

The statement raised for the first time the prospect that the real threat in Syria is that the so-called rebels that the US and its allies are backing could overrun Syrian military facilities and capture chemical weapons.

Citing unnamed US officials, CNN reported on Wednesday that the US State Department is preparing to add Jabhat al-Nusra, a Syrian Islamist militia that is playing the leading role in the military campaign against the Assad government, to its list of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.”

According to recent reports, the Al Qaeda-connected al-Nusra militia has fielded as many as 10,000 fighters, many of them foreign Islamists who have been funneled into Syria. The group is said to be the best-armed element waging the war for regime change and is credited with recently overrunning two Syrian military bases.

Much of the weaponry going to the group has reportedly been sent in by the US-backed monarchy in Qatar. The CIA set up a command-and-control headquarters in southern Turkey earlier this year to coordinate the distribution of these arms and other aid going to the “rebels.”

The designation of the al-Nusra militia as a terrorist organization would no doubt be meant to publicly distance Washington from the Al Qaeda elements upon which it has relied to wage the sectarian civil war to oust Assad. It would amount to a damning self-indictment, however, with the US government effectively making a formal admission that it has been supporting a terrorist war in Syria, replete with suicide bombings and sectarian massacres.

One reason for the pending terrorist designation is to pave the way for the US and its allies to intervene more directly in arming the “rebels,” while claiming to distinguish between “secular-democratic” elements—found largely in luxury hotels in Doha—and Islamist militias, which are bearing the brunt of the US-backed war.

Such a move is likely in conjunction with a “Friends of Syria” meeting to be held in Marrakech, Morocco next week in which Washington may join with its NATO allies in recognizing a new “rebel” front—the National Coalition for the Opposition Forces—which was cobbled together under the direction of the US State Department.

In a related development, the *New York Times* published a front-page article Thursday that cited unnamed US officials explaining that in last year’s war for regime change in Libya, “the Obama administration secretly gave its blessing to arms shipments to Libyan rebels from Qatar” that resulted in “turning some of these weapons over to Islamic militants.” The newspaper said that

evidence had yet to emerge that these weapons were used in last September’s assault on the US consulate and a secret CIA facility in Benghazi that killed the US ambassador and three other Americans.

There is little new in the article, which stresses that the Libyan experience “has taken on new urgency as the administration considers whether to play a direct role in arming rebels in Syria, where weapons are flowing in from Qatar and other countries.”

No doubt underlying these reports and maneuvers are bitter divisions within the US military-intelligence apparatus over the tactics being pursued in the wars for regime change, first in Libya and now in Syria. It would be surprising if elements within the American military did not have serious reservations about a policy founded on the US arming and supporting of forces tied to Al Qaeda.

However, an examination of the trajectory of US policy in the Middle East points to a definite relationship between Washington’s attempts to assert its hegemony by military means and Al Qaeda that is sharply at odds with the official narrative of the “war on terrorism.”

Over the past decade, every regime targeted by US imperialism for military overthrow in the Middle East, from Iraq to Libya to Syria, has been hostile to Al Qaeda and the Islamist agenda. In each of these countries, Islamist and Al Qaeda-linked forces had no real power until the US intervened. The principal target for US militarism, Iran, is a nation whose population is composed predominantly of Shiite Muslims, who have been targeted for attack by Al Qaeda elements in Iraq and elsewhere.

The motivation for military action against these countries has not been to further a “war on terror,” much less to promote democracy or humanitarianism, but rather to assert US hegemony over an oil-rich and strategically vital region of the world.

To the extent that there is a genuine issue regarding chemical weapons in Syria, it is because the Obama administration has backed a “rebel” force that is dominated by Al Qaeda-linked militias into whose hands these weapons may fall, posing the threat that they may be used in terrorist attacks elsewhere.



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