

Syrian “rebels” establish unified military command

Oliver Campbell
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Syrian “rebel” militia groups established a new unified command last Friday in talks in Turkey, attended by officials from the US, Britain, France, the Gulf States and Jordan. Around 500 delegates elected a 30-member Supreme Military Council and a chief of staff.

The US and its allies pushed for the revamping of the military command, as they previously had with the anti-Assad political leadership, in order to tighten their control over opposition forces in preparation for a more aggressive intervention into Syria.

Mustafa Sabbagh, general secretary of the Syrian National Coalition, the “rebel” front handpicked by Washington, told the Associated Press that the new command “will be exclusively responsible for receiving military aid”.

The British-based *Times* reported over the weekend that “the US is launching a covert operation to send arms to Syrian rebels for the first time.” These shipments feature stockpiles of weapons seized from the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi, including anti-aircraft missiles demanded by anti-Assad militias.

“They [the rebels] have entered the suburbs of Damascus and have surrounded its airport. US State Department officials are in regular contact with rebel field commanders, talking to them on Skype for hours every day. The commanders have repeatedly pressed for more weapons,” the *Times* stated.

Over the weekend, Syrian National Coalition spokesman Yasser Tabbara called on the major Western powers to supply advanced anti-aircraft

weaponry to enforce a “no-fly zone”. He was supported by Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah.

The composition of the new military leadership exposes the reactionary character of the Syrian opposition, dominated by Islamists, lacking any popular base and reliant on the major powers.

A conference delegate told Reuters that two-thirds of the 30-member command has links to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organisations. The body also includes Syrian military defectors, but Brigadier Mustafa al-Sheikh, a leading officer who opposes the Muslim Brotherhood, was sidelined.

The Syrian rebels and their imperialist backers have attempted to keep their distance from the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Al-Nusra, which was not invited to participate. While Washington has touted the possibility of blacklisting the organisation, it is unlikely to do so because of its major hand in the fighting. Al-Nusra reportedly played a key role in the seizure of a military command centre in Aleppo on Sunday.

Preparations to supply greater military aid to the Syrian opposition have been accompanied by a propaganda campaign about the danger of the Assad regime using chemical weapons. British Foreign Secretary William Hague last Saturday claimed to have seen “some evidence” of Syrian chemical weapons preparations, but provided no details. Reiterating comments made last week by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, he warned that the use of chemical weapons would be “a major change in the situation”.

The international press has for the most part uncritically parroted these claims. But veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk and Channel Four News journalist Alex Thompson pointed out the obvious parallel to the false claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, used to justify the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Writing in the *Independent*, Fisk debunked allegations that Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, had used chemical weapons to suppress a Sunni uprising in Hama in 1982—a conflict on which Fisk had reported. Thompson warned that “weapons of mass destruction could become weapons of mass deception,” noting that the same “media who ... brought us the Baghdad WMD story” is uncritically reporting on the “Damascus chemical weapons threat.”

On Saturday, the Syrian regime once again denied that it would use chemical weapons if it had them, and also warned that Al-Nusra had seized control of a chemicals company near Safira, east of Aleppo. Clinton had expressed concern that chemical weapons could fall into the hands of “one of the many groups that are operating within Syria”—providing another potential pretext for US intervention.

Likewise, Israel is using “chemical weapons” to justify its own operations against the Syrian government. According to the *Sunday Times*, Israel has initiated a “secret war” to track chemical and biological weapons in Syria. The article pointed to a report in the *Atlantic* last week that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had sent Mossad agents to Jordan twice to seek its support for coordinated military attacks on alleged chemical weapons facilities in Syria—a request that Amman has turned down to date.

The Israeli ambassador to the US, Michael Oren, warned on Sunday that a transfer of chemical weapons from Syria to the Lebanese militia Hezbollah would be a “game changer”. His comment points to the danger of the civil war in Syria sparking broader conflicts in the Middle East, and being used as the pretext for new wars, including an attack on Iran.

northern city of Tripoli in Lebanon, with clashes over the past week between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Alawites, who support the Assad regime, resulting in 19 deaths and the wounding of many others.

Syrian “rebels” announced last Friday that Damascus International Airport and the roads leading to it were legitimate military targets. In practice, this has led to indiscriminate attacks on civilians in the general vicinity of the airport. In parts of Jaramana, a predominantly Christian town near a major road to the airport, snipers are reportedly firing on any moving vehicle and launching rocket-propelled grenades into civilian areas.

The *Telegraph* reported that while fighting had reached Damascus, the rebels had little support in the capital and other major urban centres. Ahmed, a Sunni coach driver, told the newspaper: “We are scared of both sides. If this were a true popular revolution I would support it. But then I saw that the Muslim Brotherhood leads the FSA [Free Syrian Army], and no one wants that.” Mohammed, who fought with the “rebels” in Aleppo before becoming disillusioned, said: “It was dominated by foreign fighters and they wanted an Islamic state.”

The US and its allies in Europe and the Gulf States are due to hold a meeting of the so-called Friends of Syria group on Wednesday in Morocco. The gathering will further fuel the fighting in Syria, with all aspects of the imperialist intervention in Syria, including the provision of more advanced weaponry, coming up for discussion.



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The conflict in Syria has already spilled over into the