

US moves towards open arming of Syrian opposition

Chris Marsden
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In the lead-up to today's Friends of Syria summit meeting in Rome, the United States has signalled a shift in policy, towards openly arming the Syrian opposition that is fighting a US proxy war to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

This took place via carefully choreographed political theatre between US Secretary of State John F. Kerry, European countries including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, and the Syrian opposition itself.

The opposition Syrian National Coalition threatened to boycott the summit, ostensibly leaving Syria's friends with no one to claim friendship with. This was Kerry's cue to make repeated assurances of additional support while touring Europe's capitals, in the run-up to the Rome summit and his upcoming tour of the Middle East.

Meeting with Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague, Kerry promised that new American support for the SNC would "come to maturity by the time we meet in Rome". Other US measures would be discussed if the opposition attended the Friends of Syria meeting.

Kerry insisted the US was still pursuing a political resolution, suggesting that direct military aid was not on the immediate agenda. But he added: "We are determined that the Syrian opposition is not going to be dangling in the wind, wondering where the support is, if it is coming." "I want our friends in the Syrian opposition council to know that we are not coming to Rome simply to talk. We are coming to Rome to make a decision on next steps," he added. Hague also urged the opposition to stay involved in talks, promising that the UK believes "we must significantly increase our support for the Syrian opposition, on top of our large contributions to the humanitarian relief effort, and we are preparing to do just that."

European diplomats said the leader of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, had told the Italian government his delegation would be attending the summit Thursday. Walid al-Bunni, a spokesman for the SNC, said on Monday the move came after a phone call between al-Khatib and Kerry.

The discussion of increased aid came against a background of media reports—most prominently in the *New York Times*—that arms shipments to the opposition were on the increase, funded by Gulf states and in some cases originating in Croatia and other eastern European states.

The weapons were reportedly shipped via Jordan and Turkey. David Ottaway of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars said, "I think it's a US-Jordanian-Saudi operation—the same three groups that have worked together in the past trying to overthrow Saddam Hussein. I do not think Jordan would be doing this on its own."

"Indeed, we procured new anti-aircraft and heavy defensive weapons donated from Arab and non-Arab countries recently," Louay Almokdad, political and media coordinator for the Free Syrian Army, told CNN Sunday.

Several rebel commanders and fighters told Reuters that a shipment that reached Syria via Turkey last month comprised shoulder-held and other mobile equipment including anti-aircraft and armour-piercing weapons, mortars and rocket launchers. The weapons, along with money to pay fighters, were all being distributed through a new command structure set up to funnel foreign aid in part as a means of controlling the opposition and minimising the influence of Al-Qaeda type groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.

Reuters reported, "The rebels refused to specify who

supplied the new weapons, saying they did not want to embarrass foreign supporters, but said they had arrived openly via Turkey ‘from donor countries’. ‘We have received this shipment legally and normally. It was not delivered through smuggling routes but formally through Bab al-Hawa crossing,’ said a rebel commander.”

A Reuters photographer in Damascus saw western-built rebel firearms including US pattern M4 and Austrian Steyr assault rifles.

One rebel commander said of the money and arms supplied, “So basically it’s like we have paid in advance. It is funded by the countries that will be involved in reconstruction of Syria.”

The chief of staff of the rebel military command, Brigadier Selim Idris, said the presence of foreign fighters was hindering international support for the battle against Assad, while claiming: “We are not receiving weapons from the Europeans, we do not want to embarrass them, we do not want to embarrass anyone with the weapons issue.”

Following Kerry’s declaration in London, the *Washington Post* and CNN both reported that the Obama administration was moving toward a major policy shift on Syria that could provide rebels with equipment such as body armour and armoured vehicles, and possibly military training.

The *Washington Post* said the Obama administration is looking to remove restrictions on “dual-use” equipment, involving communications, body armour, flak jackets, night-vision equipment and military vehicles. “They are doing a redefinition of what is lethal,” a source said. “They have been working on this for a while.”

CNN stated that the changes are under discussion with US allies as part of Kerry’s tour and is being done in coordination with the European powers. Each European Union nation would decide on its own what to supply, the official said.

The *Post* noted, “Kerry has repeatedly made indirect references to a policy shift during his travels. He told a group of German students Tuesday that the United States wants a ‘peaceful resolution’ in Syria, but if its leaders refuse to negotiate and continue to kill citizens, ‘then you need to at least provide some kind of support’ for those fighting for their rights.”

Britain and France have both pushed to lift an EU

arms embargo on Syria, but met with opposition in the bloc, which led to it being renewed for three months. The EU inserted a clause, however, allowing member countries “to provide greater non-lethal support and technical assistance for the protection of civilians.”

An EU official spoke candidly to the *Washington Post*, explaining, “Under the old EU setup, we couldn’t do anything,” whereas the new rule will allow “things that don’t of themselves kill people.”

“We’re talking about things that can be helpful on the ground—bulletproof jackets, binoculars and communications,” another said.

The duplicity of the US and its European allies is made necessary by an attempt to preserve the illusion that they are seeking a diplomatic solution. Kerry even complained to the SNC that its boycott was undermining him on the eve of a meeting with Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, in Berlin Tuesday.

Speaking from Moscow on Monday, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem offered talks with the opposition, including those that have taken up arms. Lavrov urged support for the Assad regime’s initiative, warning that further fighting could lead to “the breakup of the Syrian state”.

“The Syrian people should decide their fate without external intervention,” said Lavrov, citing “sensible forces who are increasingly aware of the necessity to begin the talks as soon as possible to reach a political settlement.”

Whatever diplomatic noises are made, Washington is pushing for regime change in Syria, working through its proxies: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. On Tuesday, delegates from the Friends of Syria International Working Group, meeting in Sofia, called for sanctions to be imposed by “all members of the international community, especially members of the United Nations Security Council”—targeting Russia and China for their opposition to such measures.



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