

Kerry steps up US war threats against Syria, Iran

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6 March 2013

US Secretary of State John Kerry's first tour of the Middle East has been the occasion for naked warmongering against Syria and Iran.

At a press conference in Riyadh Monday, Kerry spoke alongside Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal.

Kerry declared his support of the arming of the Syrian opposition by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and Turkey, stating that the US will continue to work with its "friends to empower the Syrian opposition."

Responding to a question over the danger of weapons finding their way into the hands of Al Qaeda-style groups, Kerry declared that there were no guarantees, but added, "There is a very clear ability now in the Syrian opposition to make certain that what goes to the moderate, legitimate opposition is, in fact, getting to them, and the indication is that they are increasing their pressure as a result of that."

Several Arab and Turkish media sources reported more unambiguous comments by Kerry saying baldly, "[W]e should actively provide the moderate Syrian opponents with the [sic] arms."

Last week, prior to and during the Friends of Syria conference in Rome, Kerry signalled a major increase in non-lethal aid to the opposition—which has now been redefined to cover all manner of military equipment including armoured personnel carriers. But this is only a public pose of not providing military assistance. Kerry announced \$60 million in aid to the Syrian National Council in addition to \$50 million previously pledged and \$385 million in "humanitarian aid."

Saudi Arabia in all events understood that Kerry was providing US support for the arming of the opposition. Prince Saud declared, "As for providing enough aid and security for the Syrians, Saudi Arabia will do everything within its capabilities to help in this."

The reality is that nothing is being done regarding arming the opposition without US agreement and collusion.

Writing in Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, Shashank Joshi of the Royal United Services Institute noted that "Syria-watchers, like bloggers Eliot Higgins and James Miller" had noticed that the "surge of outside arms into Syria" came "from the former Yugoslavia" rather than "from the north, via Turkey, and many have clearly come from the arsenals of pro-rebel Arab countries. ... [I]t looks like large volumes of surplus Croatian arms are being purchased with Saudi Arabian money and picked up by Jordanian aircraft, and then ferried across the Syria-Jordan border to Syrian rebels who have, in all likelihood, been vetted (and some of them trained) by the United States. Although the US role may seem small, it is probably pivotal to the whole thing."

US officials have previously acknowledged that it is training opposition forces in Jordan under a covert program run by the CIA.

Kerry was equally bellicose towards Iran, stating that he and Prince Saud had discussed "our shared determination to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."

Talks on Tehran's alleged nuclear arms program "will not go on for the sake of talks, and talks cannot become an instrument for delay that in the end make the situation more dangerous," he warned. "So there is a finite amount of time."

"[President Barack] Obama has made it clear that Iran will not get nuclear weapons," he threatened.

"The negotiations cannot go on forever," echoed Prince Saud. "We can't be like the philosophers who keep talking about how many angels a pinhead can hold."

Kerry's statements in Saudi Arabia were also

noteworthy for his specifically targeting Russia for criticism. Speaking of the Syrian regime, he said, “Believe me, the bad actors, regrettably, have no shortage of their ability to get weapons from Iran, from Hezbollah, from Russia, unfortunately, and that’s happening.”

That same day, Kerry’s threats against Iran were reinforced by comments of Vice President Joe Biden, speaking to the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington.

Biden said of the US using military force to prevent Iran securing a nuclear weapon, “The president of the United States cannot, and does not, bluff. President Barack Obama is not bluffing.”

Addressing the conference via satellite link, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said to loud applause, “Words alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions must be coupled with a clear and credible military threat if diplomacy and sanctions fail.” Israel has also read the signals emanating from Washington regarding Syria, indicating that it will be on board should an escalated military offensive begin.

At the United Nations Monday, Israel warned the Security Council that it could not be expected to “stand idle” as Syria’s civil war spills over its border.

Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Ron Prosor, wrote to the 15-member council to complain about shells from Syria landing in Israel. “Israel cannot be expected to stand idle as the lives of its citizens are being put at risk by the Syrian government’s reckless actions,” he stated.

Echoing Prosor, Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned that Israel’s attack on what he described as a Syrian arms complex in Jamraya, in the Qasioun mountains on January 30, showed that Tel Aviv is serious about preventing the flow of heavy arms into Lebanon. This was a public acknowledgement that Israel had carried out the strike that killed two workers and injured five others at what Syria states is a military research centre.

Russia’s UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, president of the Security Council for March, said “a very new and dangerous phenomenon” of armed groups operating in the area of separation in the Golan Heights “potentially can undermine security between Syria and Israel.”

Britain too has taken its cue from Washington. In November, the UK recognised the Syrian National Congress as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. In January it provided £9.4 million in communications equipment, technical aid and “humanitarian support”. More is to be announced today. But Foreign Secretary William Hague has made a series of provocative statements that go far beyond its official promise of a package of “nonlethal military assistance”, such as bulletproof vests, armoured vehicles and night-vision equipment.

On Sunday Hague described President Bashar al-Assad as “delusional” for attacking the British government’s “tradition of bullying and hegemony” in a *Sunday Times* interview.

“The British government wants to send military aid to moderate groups in Syria, knowing all too well that such moderate groups do not exist in Syria”, said Assad. “[W]e all know that we are now fighting al-Qaida or Jabhat al-Nusra, which is an offshoot of al-Qaida, and other groups of people indoctrinated with extreme ideologies. This is beyond hypocritical.”

Speaking on the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show*, while dismissing Assad’s charges, Hague then said Britain could not rule out providing arms to the Syrian opposition as the situation was “too dangerous to the peace and security of that entire region, and thereby to the world” to be ignored.

In a parliamentary debate on the issue, Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire told MPs that all options for “non-lethal” help were on the table for Syria.

Yesterday, in Doha, Qatar, Kerry told CNN that arms would not be sent to Syria, “At the moment. ... But the president has made it clear, as has every other country at the table, that we will not allow President Assad to slaughter his people and to continue to rain Scuds on innocent women and children and to literally destroy his country in the effort simply to hold onto power.”

The message is clear: Not if, but when.



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