

Britain and France seek end to arms embargo on Syria

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Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement that Britain is considering arming the Syrian opposition was portrayed as a sovereign initiative, in defiance of the dictates of the European Union. It is nothing of the sort.

The UK, together with France and various regional powers such as the Gulf monarchies and Turkey are taking their cue from Washington, which has worked behind the scenes for months to channel weapons into Syria and train opposition fighters.

Speaking to senior Members of Parliament in the Common Liaison Committee, Cameron said the UK would consider vetoing any extension to the European Union's arms embargo on Syria in May. "I hope that we can persuade our European partners, if and when a further change becomes necessary, [and] they will agree with us. But if we can't, then it's not out of the question we might have to do things in our own way," he said.

The UK was "still an independent country" and "we can have an independent foreign policy," he threatened.

EU countries imposed the embargo in May 2011, prohibiting "the sale, supply, transfer or export of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment and spare parts for the aforementioned." But its renewal would be automatically ruled out if there was not unanimity between all 27 EU member states.

Britain, in alliance with France, has been charged with pushing for a harder line in Europe to bring about the downfall of the Ba'athist regime of Bashir al Assad through military intervention. In the European Union, this centres on combating opposition led by Germany which fears that Assad will be replaced by a sectarian—possibly Al-Qaeda-inspired—Sunni regime that will destabilise the entire Middle East.

Last week, Foreign Secretary William Hague told parliament the UK government would provide armoured vehicles and body armour to opposition forces in Syria as part of a multi-million-pound aid package. He did so after the UK sided with the Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande in rewriting the embargo to allow for the supply of what is euphemistically termed "non-lethal" military equipment.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle opposed lifting the ban, warning of a proxy war throughout the Middle East.

Cameron also let it be known that the UK had intended to veto the EU ban in February if it had not secured the right to ship "non-lethal" equipment. His government had even drawn up legislation that was "ready to go if we could not get agreement across Europe."

France is barely less bellicose than Britain. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius declared that removing the embargo would help level the playing field in Syria and committed to "amending" the ban accordingly.

Fabius said France would take steps on the embargo issue in the coming days. A senior French official told Reuters that "anti-aircraft missiles are among those weapons being considered for supply to rebel fighters in Syria."

London and Paris both dismissed concerns that the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front and other Jihadists and Salafists would benefit from the lifting of the embargo. "It seems that if we want to help bring about a transition in Syria, we have to work with opposition groups," said Cameron. "It may be that doing nothing will see the level of Jihadism get worse."

A Foreign Office official said, "We're talking to the opposition constantly about a whole range of support

and we know who the people we want to work with are. ... It's important to bolster the moderate elements of the opposition. We know who these are.”

“We understand the idea of not adding weapons to weapons, but that position doesn't work in the face of reality, and that [reality] is that the opposition is bombarded by others who are getting weapons while they are not,” said Fabius.

Giving voice to these arguments is vital as far as Washington is concerned. So far the Obama administration has been forced to work clandestinely through various proxies and intermediaries to arm the opposition—primarily due to fear of the political fallout from being seen to be arming Al Qaeda in Syria as it already did in Libya. A shift to open intervention needs to be justifiable.

Germany's concerns mirror those articulated by Russia, with which Berlin has spent more than two decades seeking to establish closer political and commercial ties. On this front too, London and Paris are acting to secure a possible compromise that would allow for Assad to go and the establishment of a government incorporating the opposition and sections of the Ba'athists.

Again on Tuesday, Fabius told France's foreign affairs committee in the National Assembly that negotiations are ongoing between France, Russia and the United States in an attempt to draw up a list of Syrian officials with whom the opposition are prepared to negotiate. Negotiations took place yesterday in London between the UK and Russia.

The campaign to overturn the EU arms embargo has been joined by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Turkey. During an official visit to London last week, for example, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said the embargo had strengthened Assad's forces, which receive weapons from Russia and Iran not the EU.

It is now widely reported that the US is working with all these regimes in arming and training the opposition to Assad. Last weekend saw the publication of a report by Germany's *Der Spiegel* of uniformed Americans in Jordan training fighters bound for Syria in the use of anti-tank weaponry. Over 200 men have already received training in the past three months and there are plans to train 1,200 members of the Free Syrian Army in two camps in the south and the east of Jordan, the

magazine stated, citing anonymous sources. Jordanian intelligence services sources stated that the eventual aim was to build around a dozen units totalling some 10,000 men. The UK's *Guardian* Saturday identified British and French instructors as working alongside the US in Jordan.

A major military escalation is clearly already underway, in anticipation of the breach of the EU embargo in May.

On Tuesday, in the US, James R. Clapper, the director of national intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on current and projected threats to the nation that the erosion of the Syrian regime's authority is accelerating.

An “increasingly beleaguered” government unable to defeat opposition forces with conventional weapons, “might be prepared to use chemical weapons” against its own people, he claimed.

Clapper complained that while the forces seeking to oust Assad are gaining strength and territory, the opposition remains fragmented and foreign Jihadists were gaining influence and strength. There are “literally hundreds” of cells of opposition fighters over which leaders are struggling to impose more centralised command and control, he added. “Iran continues to be a destabilizing force in the region providing weapons and training to Syrian forces and standing up a militia force there to fight the Syrian opposition.”

The training of non-Salafist forces in Jordan and the supplying of arms and money to the Syrian opposition are conceived of as means of ensuring that, when it is deemed time to move decisively against Syria, there will be a trusted pro-western proxy force able to dictate events on the ground.



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