

Kerry's Middle East tour prepares endless war in Afghanistan, Syria

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US Secretary of State John Kerry left Kabul for Paris yesterday, after a Middle Eastern tour to Jordan and Afghanistan to plan broader wars across the region. In Paris today, he is expected to discuss arming opposition forces fighting Washington's proxy war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with French officials.

During his unannounced two-day visit in Kabul, Kerry held a joint press conference with President Hamid Karzai, the leader of the American puppet regime in Afghanistan. He announced that US forces will remain in Afghanistan beyond the Obama administration's 2014 withdrawal deadline.

Kerry and Karzai both called upon the Taliban to open an office in Doha, the capital of the US-allied Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar, from which location they could negotiate with Karzai. To encourage the Taliban to accept the offer, Kerry stressed that the Taliban should not count on a US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Currently there are some 100,000 occupation troops in the country, including 66,000 US forces. American officials have reportedly discussed a lasting presence of roughly 12,000 US and European troops in Afghanistan.

Kerry also offered to hand over formal control of Bagram prison to the Karzai regime. This was apparently designed to allow Karzai to posture cynically before the Afghan people, claiming he is restoring Afghan sovereignty over the country. The US-controlled prison, notorious for the killings and torture of Afghan resistance fighters imprisoned there, has become a hated symbol of the NATO occupation.

This action was apparently aimed at smoothing US relations with Karzai, strained after the latter criticized Washington for "colluding" with the Taliban.

The handover of Bagram has nothing to do with

ending US rule in Afghanistan, however. Karzai made clear that Washington would continue to effectively control detainees at the prison, promising that an Afghan review board would consider intelligence provided by US authorities before deciding to release prisoners. Afghan officials also reportedly gave "private assurances" that no "enduring security threats" would be released from Bagram.

By threatening to continue the bombing and occupation of Afghanistan, Kerry is pushing the Taliban leadership to negotiate a political settlement with Karzai that would include a lasting US protectorate in Afghanistan. Washington's control would rest upon US air superiority and a permanent occupation force stationed in the country. It would be based on collaboration between Washington, the warlords backing Karzai and the Islamic fundamentalist leadership of the Taliban to suppress resistance to foreign occupation by the Afghan people.

The American ruling class sees Afghanistan as a launching pad for US operations in Central Asia, such as the hundreds of drone strikes Washington has launched in Afghanistan and neighboring countries. The *New York Times* commented, "The Obama administration has made a priority of reaching an agreement on an American military presence here after 2014 that will allow the United States to keep tabs on Iran and Pakistan."

Significantly, Kerry had hoped to visit Pakistan during his tour, but decided against it. There is deep anger in that country over US drone strikes and the collaboration of the Pakistani army and intelligence with Washington. (See also: "UN says US drone war in Pakistan violates international law")

Instead, Kerry reportedly met privately with Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani in the

Jordanian capital of Amman on Sunday, before traveling to Afghanistan.

Washington's neo-colonial war in Afghanistan—like its proxy war in Syria, Iran's main Arab ally—aims at establishing US imperialist hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia. This involves not only controlling and manipulating the conflicts in Pakistan and broadly across Asia unleashed by the Afghan war, but also organizing regime change in Iran, an oil-rich state that Washington sees as the main obstacle to its interests in the Middle East.

Kerry's visits both to Amman and to Kabul were clearly bound up with Washington's war drive against Iran and its regional allies. As the Secretary of State left Jordan for Afghanistan, the Associated Press (AP) reported that the US is working in Jordan with Britain and France to train Syrian opposition fighters. These fighters then cross the border into southern Syria to carry out attacks.

The AP wrote that these forces were "secular" forces, apparently in an attempt to distinguish them from Al Qaeda-linked forces that provide the bulk of the Syrian opposition's fighting forces. The wire service's description of these forces made clear, however, that they are largely army deserters recruited on a religious or tribal basis.

It wrote, "The training has been conducted for several months now in an unspecified location, concentrating largely on Sunnis and tribal Bedouins who formerly served as members of the Syrian army, officials told the Associated Press. The forces aren't members of the leading rebel group, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which Washington and others fear may be increasingly coming under the saw of extremist militia groups, including some linked to Al Qaeda."

The AP report came a day after the *New York Times* published an extensive report detailing how Qatar, Jordan and Saudi Arabia helped finance and arm the Syrian opposition for over a year. This took place under CIA supervision and after General David Petraeus, the CIA director until last November, "prodded various countries" to arm the Syrian opposition. The White House was regularly briefed on these arms shipments. (See also: "The CIA war against Syria")

On Monday, White House spokesman Josh Earnest confirmed that the US "has provided some logistical nonlethal support that has also come in handy for the

Syrian rebels."

With Kerry now headed to Paris to discuss stepping up the war in Syria, the Arab League also joined in the campaign against Assad yesterday, formally seating Syrian opposition officials as Syria's representatives to the Arab League.

Qatari emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani officially welcomed Moaz al-Khatib, the former imam of Damascus' Umayyad Mosque who recently stepped down as the Syrian opposition's official leader, to represent Syria. Al-Khatib was replaced by Ghassan Hitto, a US-based information technology executive. This move apparently aimed to present the opposition as less Islamist and reliant on Al Qaeda-linked forces from Libya, Iraq and Chechnya.

Al-Khatib's speech at the Arab League made no secret of the Syrian opposition's continuing ties to far-right Islamist elements. Denouncing Assad and supporting Hitto, he defended the presence of foreign jihadist fighters among the anti-Assad militias—though he awkwardly tried to downplay this by suggesting that if Islamist fighters' families needed them at home, they should return to their families.



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