US ramps up plans for military intervention in Syria

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The United States and the major European powers are escalating plans for a direct military intervention in Syria.

The aim of US maneuvers, including a flurry of diplomatic visits this week, is to secure the downfall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a key ally of Iran, while putting in place a government that will operate under the control of Washington.

Last week, top US military officials announced that they would be deploying 200 troops to Syria's neighbor to the south, Jordan. Officials made clear that this was an initial deployment of forces to set up headquarters near the border with Syria, preparing the way for sending 20,000 or more troops in the coming months.

This act of military aggression has been followed this week by a series of threats and pledges for expanded aid to Syrian opposition forces.

Responding to unsubstantiated allegations by Israel that Syria has used chemical weapons, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared at a NATO council meeting in Brussels on Tuesday that it was necessary to "carefully and collectively consider how NATO is prepared to respond to protect its members from a Syrian threat, including any potential chemical weapons threat."

The Obama administration has previously declared chemical weapons use to be a "red line" that would spark an aggressive response.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Ramussen added that the members of the alliance, which includes Syria's northern neighbor Turkey, "have all plans ready to ensure effective defense and protection of Turkey."

The chemical weapons claims from Israel are based on photographs supplied by opposition forces relating to a battle that took place near Aleppo on March 19. The Assad regime has claimed that it was the rebels, not government forces, who used the weapons.

Last week, Britain and France made their own charges of chemical weapons use in a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, based on soil samples provided by Western-backed forces.

Russian Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov noted that the US and European powers had blocked an investigation into claims of chemical weapons use. "Instead of sending a group of experts to a concrete location near Aleppo, as it was promised," Lavrov said, "they started demanding the Syrian authority give access to all facilities on Syrian territory. They started to require allowing them to interrogate all citizens on the territory of Syria."

He added, "It is an attempt to politicize the issue and attempt to give the same requirements to Syria as were given to Iraq long ago, where nuclear weapons were looked for."

The Obama administration has not yet officially adopted the position that Syria used chemical weapons, seeking more time to prepare its military escalation and put in place and supply a suitable coalition to take power from Assad.

Over the weekend, at a meeting in Istanbul of the 11 "core" members of the Friends of Syria group, Kerry announced the US would double its "non-lethal" assistance to the so-called "rebels" to $250 million.

According to Reuters, a US official said Friday that this aid "could include for the first time battlefield support equipment such as body armor and night-vision goggles." The news agency continued, "US officials have said in the past that the equipment could include armored vehicles and advanced communications equipment, but Kerry gave no specifics."

With unbridled cynicism, Kerry—the head of a state that has been stoking up a sectarian civil war in Syria, having inflicted a catastrophe on Iraq—declared that expanded intervention was necessary to prevent Syria from "being torn apart and perhaps breaking up into enclaves [with the] potential of sectarian violence which this region knows there is too much of."

On Monday, the European Union announced that it too was expanding its aid to the Syrian opposition, while also allowing European importers to purchase oil from pro-Western Syrian groups.

Since the beginning of its efforts to instigate civil war in Syria, the United States has relied heavily on Islamic fundamentalist forces, particularly the Al Nusra front, which recently officially declared its allegiance to Al Qaeda. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have supplied weapons to these forces, while the US has been engaged in covert operations to send Islamist forces from Libya and other countries to assist in the campaign against Assad.

However, as Washington prepares more direct efforts to bring down Assad, there is concern that these forces could come to power, gaining control of chemical weapons stockpiles and posing a threat to US interests and allies, including Israel.

At the weekend meeting where Kerry announced plans to double US aid, he secured an agreement that all funds from the Friends of Syria group would go through the opposition Military Council command, headed by Salim Idriss, a former general in Assad's military who is now close to the US. The Obama administration is hoping that Idriss can cobble together a government, including sections of the Syrian military, that will serve as a suitable proxy for American interests.

The decision to funnel money through Idriss was, according to Kerry "one of the most important single things that was agreed on" at the meeting.

Obama himself met on Tuesday with Qatar's Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, a key supplier of weapons to the Syrian opposition, discussing, among other things, the future of arms shipments. Tensions have grown between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Washington, on the other, because the two Gulf states have funneled the bulk of their military aid to jihadist militias, including those linked to Al Qaeda.

Obama said that the two countries need to "pursue common strategies" in order to be "a force for good for the entire region." Speaking alongside the head of the reactionary Gulf fiefdom, he added that the "huge tragedy" in Syria could be resolved if the current government "finds an exit, and new people who believe in democracy take its place."

US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel is in the midst of a trip throughout the Middle East that includes Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He is finalizing details of a $10 billion US arms deal with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, directed against Iran. According to the *New York Times*, the package includes "tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft, which can be used for transporting troops and patrolling borders and nearby seas," two dozen F-16 warplanes to the UAE, and air-to-ground precision guided missiles to both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

"Two systems to be sold to Israel—a new generation of aerial refueling tankers and advanced missiles that home in on radar signals to destroy air-defense sites—would be important in any attack on Iran's nuclear facilities," the *Times* noted.

In Israel, Hagel said on Sunday that the weapons sale was "another very clear signal to Iran." He added, referring to the US and Israel, "This is a difficult and dangerous time, this is a time when friends and allies must remain close, closer than ever."

Following his meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Hagel stopped in Amman, Jordan for discussions with the monarchy's top military commander, General Meshal al-Zaben. According to the *Washington Post*, the two "discussed instability along Jordan's northern border with Syria and reviewed various contingency plans, including options for dealing with Syria's chemical weapons stockpile"—i.e., military intervention in Syria.

The massive escalation of military violence in the Middle East, led by the United States, threatens to engulf the entire area in a regional war that could lead to the deaths of millions of people. A regional war could also quickly involve Russia and China, traditional allies of both Syria and Iran.

Only a few months into its second term, the Obama administration is setting a course with catastrophic consequences for the people of the Middle East, the United States and the entire world.