

Behind Syria peace talks proposal, US prepares regional war

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23 May 2013

While ostensibly touring the Middle East to discuss a joint US-Russian proposal for peace talks between the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad and Western-backed “rebels,” Secretary of State John Kerry met with US allies to prepare for region-wide war.

Stopping first in Oman, Kerry held talks with the ruling Sultan, one of the string of monarchical dictators that constitute, together with Israel, the foundation of US influence in the Middle East. The secretary of state’s visit coincided with the signing of a \$2.1 billion deal between the absolute monarchy and Raytheon Corp. for the sale of advanced weapons systems, including Avenger fire units, Stinger missiles, and Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles, part of a ring of steel that Washington has sought to erect around Iran.

From there, he flew to Amman, Jordan for a meeting Wednesday of the “Friends of Syria,” a US-led “coalition of the willing” that is fomenting the war for regime change in Syria. It consists of Washington, its European NATO allies, led by Britain, Turkey, Egypt and the various sheikhdoms and sultanates of the Persian Gulf, including the major arms suppliers to the anti-Assad militias: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

As the conference was convening Wednesday, Syria’s ambassador to Jordan held a press conference to denounce it as “a meeting of Syria’s enemies”

“Those who want to end the tragedy in Syria need to stop arming and training terrorist gangs in Syria. The war on Syria is unprecedented,” said the ambassador, Bahjat Suleiman.

Representatives of the Syrian National Coalition, the anti-Assad front cobbled together by the US State Department, were invited to the meeting only at the last minute. It appears there was some doubt if an agreement could be reached on whom the “rebels” would accept as their representative.

The US has promoted Ghassan Hitto, a Texas-based businessman linked to the Muslim Brotherhood who has lived in the US for over 30 years, as the “premier” of a transitional government. There have been increasing reports, however, that his role is strongly opposed by the Sunni sectarian militias that are fighting in Syria. It was reported that the coalition’s “acting chief,” George Sabra, a former member of the Stalinist Syrian Communist Party, would stand in for the “rebels.”

While the State Department claims that Kerry’s role in this gathering is to prepare for Syrian peace talks—dubbed Geneva 2—which Washington and Moscow have publicly agreed to support, it is evident that the real agenda occupying the US and its allies is how to salvage the war for regime change, under conditions in which the Syrian government is inflicting strategic reverses on the Western-backed forces.

This has emerged most clearly in the Syrian army’s overrunning of the city of Qusayr in western Syria, just eight miles from the Lebanese border. The town, which had fallen under control of the Western-backed militias, has served as a key pipeline for arms and foreign fighters crossing the Lebanese border. “Rebel” control of the surrounding region also threatened to separate the Syrian capital of Damascus from the city of Aleppo as well as the Syrian coast.

Speaking at a news conference in Amman at the opening of the “Friends of Syria” meeting, Kerry warned that if the Assad regime failed to negotiate a political solution, Washington would consider “growing support for the opposition in order to continue to fight for the freedom of their country.” With US officials demanding Assad’s ouster as a condition for any settlement, it appears that the proposed talks will be turned into a pretext for escalating the US intervention.

Kerry’s remark came just one day after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved by a 15-to-3 vote

a proposal for Washington to directly arm the opposition militias. The CIA is already coordinating the arms flows from the Gulf states and has reportedly organized large shipments from Eastern Europe through third parties.

Kerry blamed the reversals suffered by Washington's proxy forces in the battle for Qusayr on the role played by fighters of Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based party and militia that is aligned with the Assad government, as well as on alleged Iranian backing for the regime.

"Just last week, obviously, Hezbollah intervened very, very significantly," said Kerry. "There are several thousands of Hezbollah militia forces on the ground in Syria who are contributing to this violence and we condemn that."

Hezbollah has acknowledged that its fighters are in Syria, but has denied reports that they are playing any decisive role in the fighting, insisting rather that they are training Lebanese in Syrian border towns to defend themselves.

The Western media has also focused on Hezbollah's role, while ignoring the fact that large numbers of Sunni Islamist fighters have also come across the Lebanese border to fight against the Assad regime.

The threat that this conflict will spill over the region's borders into a full-scale regional war grows daily. In the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, at least 11 people have died, including at least two Lebanese army soldiers, in clashes between Sunni militias and Lebanese Alawite supporters of Assad. The clashes have seen exchanges of mortar fire and rocket-propelled grenades, bringing schools, businesses and other activities to a standstill.

The State Department issued a statement denouncing Hezbollah's role in Syria, charging that it serves to "exacerbate and inflame regional sectarian tensions." No such denunciations were forthcoming when the Islamist forces overran Qusayr, decapitating and shooting members of the substantial Alawite and Christian minority populations in the area and forcing thousands to flee their homes.

In one measure of the opposition's desperation, acting National Coalition chief Sabra issued a statement on the eve of the Amman conference calling for the US and its allies to "open a humanitarian corridor" to Qusayr—in other words, to launch a direct Western military intervention on Syrian soil.

In a conference call on Tuesday, a senior State Department official acknowledged, "One of the things we'll be talking about here in Amman tomorrow is what else needs to be done with respect to the military balance

on the ground."

In advancing its militarist agenda, Washington has stepped up a propaganda campaign charging that Iran is likewise responsible for the reverses suffered by the anti-Assad forces in Syria. A senior State Department official told the *Washington Post* that Iranian forces are fighting in Syria, repeating totally unsubstantiated allegations by the "rebels" as fact.

As the *Post* pointed out, "The US official's allegation was a tacit acknowledgment that the two-year Syrian conflict has become a regional war and a *de facto* US proxy fight with Iran."

The *Post*'s columnist David Ignatius noted that while there is public talk of a peace conference in Geneva by next month, "the battling on the ground is so intense, and the demand for additional weapons [from the opposition] so vocal, that a skeptical person should ask whether the Geneva talks will take place at all."

Washington's ostensible agreement with Moscow on peace talks is merely another tactic to advance its strategic aims in the region, which have been prosecuted through the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Syria. Behind the crocodile tears about Syrian civilian casualties, its objective remains the same as that which underlay the eruption of American militarism 12 years ago: the assertion by military means of hegemonic control over strategic energy reserves coveted by its rivals, particularly in China and Russia.

As the evolution of the proxy war in Syria demonstrates, this predatory US intervention points directly toward a far wider and catastrophic conflagration that threatens not only war against Iran, but confrontation with Russia and China as well.



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