

US threatens Iran, Hezbollah for backing Syria

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The White House issued its most threatening statement yet yesterday, denouncing Iran and the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah as “partners in tyranny” for their support of the Assad regime in Syria.

This week, Syrian government forces claimed victory in the battle for the strategic town of Qusayr, near the Lebanese border, after weeks of fighting beginning May 19. Qusayr lies along a land corridor linking Damascus and the Mediterranean coastal area that is home to Assad’s Alawite sect and is, at the same time, key to maintaining opposition supply lines to Lebanon.

The battle involved Lebanon’s Shia Hezbollah militants in support of Assad, pitched against the numerous Sunni groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front and other foreign fighters backed by the region’s Sunni states.

White House spokesman Jay Carney responded by condemning “in the strongest possible terms the Assad regime’s assault on Qusayr,” adding: “It is clear that the regime is unable to contest the opposition’s control of a place like Qusayr on their own, and that is why they are dependent on Hezbollah and Iran to do their work for them.”

After being routed from Qusayr, the leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, Gen. Salim Idris, told the BBC that Hezbollah fighters were “invading” Syria, and “when they continue to do that and the Lebanese authorities don’t take any action to stop them coming to Syria, I think we are allowed to fight Hezbollah fighters inside [Lebanese] territory.”

He made good on his word Wednesday night, as a dozen rockets fired from Syria hit areas in and around the Lebanese city of Baalbek, injuring a number of people. Lebanon’s National News Agency said 11 rockets hit various locations, including the city centre.

In another effort to escalate the war, opposition fighters seized the Syrian-controlled section of the Quneitra crossing in the Golan Heights bordering Israel. Austria announced that it was withdrawing its 380 troops from the 1,000-strong United Nations force monitoring a ceasefire between Syria and Israel. Tel Aviv declared the border area a closed military zone, shut the main road link and evacuated farmers. The border area was reclaimed by the Syrian Army, but not before three mortars had landed in Israeli territory.

Tensions have been whipped up throughout the week by the US and its allies. The past days were dominated by allegations emanating from France and Britain of chemical weapon use by the Assad regime, in a transparent effort to supply a pretext for stepped-up military aggression.

In Paris Tuesday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said he had passed analyses to identify military toxins to the head of a United Nations inquiry into chemical weapon use in Syria. “These analyses demonstrate the presence of sarin gas,” he claimed. “In view of this evidence, France is now certain that sarin gas has been used in Syria several times and in a localised manner.”

President Francois Hollande later echoed Fabius, declaring, “We have elements of proof and we urge the international community to act.”

Both stressed that France would not act unilaterally and would hold talks with Washington. Their concern is that peace negotiations planned to be held in Geneva should not be too openly exposed as a fiction, given the stress being placed by the Obama administration on neutralising Russian opposition to the fall of its main Middle East ally.

“A line has been indisputably breached,” said Fabius and France and its allies must decide “whether to react,

including in an armed manner... But at the same time we must not block an eventual peace conference.”

The conference will not now take place this month, as planned, and will meet in July, if at all.

France’s announcement was meant to reinforce the more tentative findings of a UN commission of enquiry on human rights abuses that cited “reasonable evidence” of chemical weapons being used in Syria on four occasions in March and April but without attributing blame.

Britain’s Foreign Office also said that body fluids collected from victims of one or more attacks in Syria were found by scientists at its Porton Down facility to contain evidence of sarin use.

There is every reason to question any claim made by France or the UK, given their record of lies to justify wars in the Balkans and Iraq—more so because the claims made now are insubstantial and without independent verification.

Some of the blood samples used by France were smuggled out of Syria by *Le Monde* journalists and reportedly supplied by local doctors. There were no details on how France obtained other samples used. In only one case has Fabius claimed that the use of sarin is directly attributed to government forces, saying there was “no doubt that it was the regime and its accomplices.”

A UK spokesman was more equivocal, stating that there could be no “100 percent certainty” that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons. The FCO would not even confirm where or when its samples were collected. Mark Lyall Grant, Britain’s ambassador to the United Nations, stated only that they revealed evidence suggesting use of a number of different chemical agents, “sometimes including sarin, sometimes not.”

Ake Sellstrom, who heads the UN investigation, issued a statement cautioning that “the validity of the information is not ensured in the absence of convincing evidence of the chain of custody of the data collected.”

Ultimately, what happens next will not be decided in Paris or London, but in Washington.

President Barack Obama has warned that use of chemical weapons crosses a “red line,” but there are divisions over how far and how fast to proceed against Syria.

After discussing France’s and Britain’s claims

Tuesday evening at a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels, Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel told reporters that he had not seen the evidence and that NATO’s role continues to be to help protect alliance members such as Turkey. “[B]eyond that we didn’t get into any additional war plans regarding Syria,” he said.

There is no popular support in the US for war against Syria, and a great deal to lose if things go wrong for the ruling class. That is why, to date, the Obama administration has preferred to proceed through local intermediaries—the FSA and its regional backers, Turkey and Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It wants to eliminate Assad as an ally of Iran, without unduly provoking Russia, and is seeking to cook up a replacement regime that is acceptable to Moscow.

There is in addition mounting concern that the conflict is rapidly spreading out of control, dragging in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq and even Israel. There are divisions over how to respond, with Republicans such as Senator John McCain and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lobbying hard for Obama to make good on his “red line” threat.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that Moscow had so far refrained from supplying the powerful S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Damascus he had earlier said would be a “stabilising factor” and would deter foreign intervention in Syria.

After talks Tuesday with European Union leaders in Yekaterinburg, Putin said the contract signed several years ago had not yet “been realised” because, “We do not want to upset the balance in the region.”

He warned, however, that, “Any attempts to influence the situation by force through direct military action is doomed to fail and would unavoidably bring about large humanitarian casualties.”



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