

# Washington ships arms to Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria

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The United States is to officially begin arms shipments to Syria, after months of doing so through third parties such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

A story placed with the *Wall Street Journal* cited CIA sources relating plans to start supplying arms directly to the opposition Free Syrian Army “within a month.”

The CIA has already begun shipping weapons to a secret network of warehouses in neighbouring Jordan, in an operation backed by European and Arab powers. It will provide training to forces that are supposedly “moderate” and “separate” from Al Qaeda-linked forces such as the Al Nusra Front.

The shipments will fuel an August offensive against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The Obama administration cited unsubstantiated US and French claims that pro-Assad forces have used chemical weapons such as sarin on ten separate occasions to claim that a “red line” has been crossed justifying an open policy of arming the opposition.

Vast quantities of weaponry have already been sent via Saudi Arabia to Islamist groups. Washington now claims that weapons sent to “moderates” are the best means of ensuring that Al Nusra’s dominant role can be challenged. This is supposed to be guaranteed by CIA oversight and training by US special operations forces. But the CIA will spend a mere two weeks vetting and training an initial group of fighters.

The US already has 1,000 troops in Jordan providing training.

France is considering sending arms to “balance” the military aid received by the Assad regime from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, according to Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius.

In Britain, there is substantial domestic political opposition to sending arms, including within the ruling Conservative Party and its Liberal Democrat coalition

partners. This has forced Prime Minister David Cameron to promise a vote in Parliament on the issue that might make him dependent upon the opposition Labour Party.

Labour Leader Ed Miliband was invited Wednesday to discuss Syria at the National Security Council in 10 Downing Street. He was last invited to attend a National Security Council meeting in 2011, to sign off on the government’s decision to take military action against former Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Cameron has also said the government reserves the right to act in the national interest without parliamentary assent.

Washington’s reliance on Saudi Arabia to arm the opposition gives the lie to all claims that it is seeking to prevent Al Qaeda securing weapons, given Saudi intelligence agencies’ close ties to far-right Islamist forces throughout the region.

On Tuesday, speaking alongside US Secretary of State John Kerry, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said that Saudi Arabia would help the Syrian opposition fight in an “invaded country” that was facing “genocide” in “the most effective way we can.”

Saudi Arabia and Qatar will provide heavy weaponry, including hand-held surface-to-air missiles.

Kerry said, “We share a belief with Saudi Arabia and many countries that ... this next period of time is an important period of time where decisions could be made that could affect the region for years to come.”

His only caveat on supplying weapons was that “we want to make sure that’s being done in a coordinated way.”

Reinforcing the demand for arms shipments, a team of United Nations inspectors are in Turkey, supposedly to gather information about the possible use of

chemical weapons, headed by Swedish scientist Ake Sellstrom. He is expected to deliver an interim report in July, without any basis for doing so other than to justify a predetermined course of action and, in particular, the military offensive planned to begin in August.

A Turkish official admitted that it is not possible to establish anything conclusively, “As [Sellstrom] cannot travel to Syria.” All he will have will be intelligence and interviews provided by Turkey and alleged victims.

In Saudi Arabia, Kerry made the appropriate noises about seeking a negotiated solution and denied that there were any US or Saudi troops “on the ground” in Syria, because he is formally committed to a peace conference in Geneva—that again will not take place until after the planned military offensive.

Russia is an ally of the Assad regime and is insisting that it will be represented at the Geneva talks alongside Iran. The US also faces opposition from its allies including Italy and Germany to arming the opposition.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday that Russia is committed to arranging a peace conference, but other countries and groups are trying to set preconditions. “The opposition, which is supported by the West, and other countries in the region announced they are not going to the conference as long as the regime doesn’t agree to capitulate,” he said.

On Wednesday, outgoing US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice attacked Russia and China for vetoing action against Syria, calling the UN Security Council’s inaction “a stain” on its reputation. “The council’s inaction on Syria is a moral and strategic disgrace that history will judge harshly,” she pontificated. Rice is set to become President Barack Obama’s national security adviser.

Russia this week announced that it has withdrawn all its military and non-diplomatic civilian personnel out of Syria, including an evacuation of the 70 people at its naval supply station in the Mediterranean port of Tartus. The move does not affect Russia’s ability to operate militarily in either the Mediterranean or in Syria, as Cyprus has agreed the use of its ports. A 16-ship naval task force is still in the eastern Mediterranean.

Politically, however, it indicates an assumption that an escalation of the war is imminent.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a diplomatic but nevertheless firm statement that Berlin

would not supply weapons to the opposition. Speaking in parliament Thursday, she said “The hardship of the people of Syria is immeasurably great, their situation is unbearable” and that “anyone with a heart” would want to help them.

“In this desperate situation, which is increasingly threatening the entire region, surely each of us can understand that our friends and partners the US, Britain and France are considering helping parts of the Syrian opposition with weapons shipments,” she said, but added, “Whether this approach can succeed is an entirely different question.”

“The risks, in my view, would be almost impossible to assess,” she said. At the G8 summit in Northern Ireland, she continued, “I made it unmistakably clear that Germany for legal reasons sends no weapons into civil war zones, including Syria.”

Washington, Berlin, London and Paris all face majority domestic opposition to their war-mongering in Syria, with only the various pseudo-left groups such as the US International Socialist Organisation, Germany’s *Die Linke*, Britain’s Socialist Workers Party and France’s New Anti-capitalist Party still denying the obviously sectarian character of the opposition militias.

This week and last, new videos have emerged on YouTube of opposition fighters beheading and shooting Syrian civilians, including two women. Two men, beheaded with a small knife before a cheering crowd, were accused of aiding Assad and were reportedly a priest and another Christian.

On Thursday, four people were killed in a suicide blast in a Christian neighborhood in the Syrian capital, Damascus. The blast took place near the Greek Orthodox Virgin Mary Church in Bab Sharqi. Several people were wounded.



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