

Obama steps up drive to war against Syria

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The drumbeat in Washington for imperialist war against Syria continues as the Obama administration steps up its campaign to consolidate support in Congress and scrape together international backing in the wake of the no vote in the British parliament.

Top White House officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, met with the Democrat House Caucus yesterday and continued their lobbying of Democrats and Republicans. Obama yesterday met with Republicans John McCain and Lindsey Graham and is due to hold discussions today with House and Senate armed services, intelligence and foreign relations committees.

While the majority of the American people oppose war on Syria, this finds no reflection within the political establishment. Leaders of both political parties in Congress have declared their backing for the administration's plans. As was the case a decade ago with the invasion of Iraq, the US Congress is preparing to rubberstamp an illegal war of aggression to prosecute the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East.

The exact form of words is the subject of behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing. Some Democrats have expressed concerns about giving a carte blanche, as the resolution does, for the open-ended use of US forces, including ground troops, over an indefinite period of time. McCain, who has now publicly supported the war declaring a no vote would be "catastrophic" for US credibility, previously criticized Obama for not committing to an extended military campaign to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Obama administration claim that military operations will be "limited" is being quickly exposed as a lie. The overriding aim of the military intervention is to stem the defeats being inflicted by Syrian military forces on the right-wing Islamist militia that the US and its allies have been backing, financing and arming over

the past two years, as part of a broader effort to strengthen US control over the entire region.

Following their meeting with Obama, McCain and Graham—the leading proponents of war in Syria in the Senate—are now expressing satisfaction that the administration was committed to an expanded operation. "There's a consensus being formed that we need to degrade Assad's capabilities and upgrade the opposition," Graham said. (See transcript)

"Degrading Assad's capabilities"—language that was also used in Obama's White House address on Saturday—is a reference to plans to target the Syrian military as a whole, particularly its air force, which will lead to the killing of thousands of soldiers and civilians.

In addition to US military action, the administration is moving to significantly increase its supply of military weapons to the opposition. "There seems to be emerging from this administration a pretty solid plan to upgrade the opposition," Graham said, "to get the regional players more involved. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, a lot of the Gulf Arab states have been helping quietly. Now is the time to get out front and be more overt."

Bringing Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan directly into the conflict will involve them in a regional civil war against US competitors in the region.

Beyond Syria, the main target of US operations is Iran and Russia. "What does it mean if Assad with the backing of the Iranians and the Russians win after we say Assad's got to go?" Graham added. "The Russians and the Iranians are all in. I finally see an effort by this administration to counter. At the end of the day, this is a Syrian fight. But the outcome does not limit itself to Syria."

The comments from McCain and Graham make clear that the unsubstantiated charges of chemical weapons use is simply a pretext used to stampede the American people behind another massive war with regional and

global consequences.

Obama's call for a Congressional resolution is a cynical maneuver to provide a legal fig-leaf for this war. Once the strikes are launched, the Obama administration will quickly override any constraints in the very broadly-worded resolution, arguing the exigencies of war.

Moreover, while declaring their confidence in a yes vote, Obama and Kerry have not ruled out ignoring the result if it is voted down. "I said that the president has the authority to act [alone]," Kerry told the NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, "but the Congress is going to do what's right here."

Kerry also added to the compendium of lies and empty assertions that constitute the pretext for war. He claimed to have fresh evidence of the use of sarin, saying blood and hair samples provided by first responders on the scene in Syria had "tested positive" for the deadly gas.

Given that the UN inspectors are yet to release any findings, the only likely source of the "evidence" is a US-backed group inside Syria desperate to secure US military involvement. Moreover, the fact that sarin gas was used is not the issue, but who used it. Previous attacks using chemical weapons have been carried out by opposition forces.

In comments yesterday to the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, Syrian President Assad again rejected US allegations that his government was responsible for the gassing of civilians and challenged the Obama administration to provide concrete evidence. "Let us suppose that our army wishes to use WMD: is it really going to do so in an area where it is actually present and where soldiers have been wounded by these weapons, as the UN inspectors?" Assad asked.

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has dismissed the evidence shown to the Russian government by US, French and British officials. "Yes, we were shown certain pieces of evidence that did not contain anything concrete—neither geographical locations, nor names, nor evidence that samples had been taken by professionals. Nor did they comment on the fact that numerous experts have serious doubts regarding the video footage circulating on the Internet ... When you ask for more detailed evidence, they say that

it is classified, therefore it cannot be shown to us," he said.

Russia, which has blocked resolutions in the UN Security Council against its ally Syria, announced that its navy was moving two more warships—an anti-submarine vessel and a guided missile cruiser—into the Mediterranean Sea. The Pentagon moved a fifth guided-missile destroyer into the area last week in preparation for its blitzkrieg against Syria.

The presence of the Russian navy, which also has a base at the Syrian port of Tartus, underlines the utter recklessness of the Obama administration's foreign policy and war plans. Any US military action has the potential to trigger a broader regional conflict that could draw in major powers such as Russia and China and spark a global war.

Assad warned in his *Figaro* interview: "The Middle East is a powder keg, and today the flame is coming very near. We cannot talk merely about the Syrian response, but about what might take place after the first strike ... Everyone will lose control of the situation when the powder keg explodes. Chaos and extremism will spread. There is a risk of regional war."

CNN reported yesterday that three Middle Eastern countries—Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have offered the use of their military assets to the US. Senior Arab diplomats told CNN that preliminary discussions were already underway with Saudi Arabia and UAE, but provided no details.

Saudi Arabia, along with Qatar, has been one of the key backers of the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias that comprise the main military forces involved in the US-led regime change operation to oust Assad. Support for these reactionary militias has already escalated sectarian Sunni-Shiite tensions and violence, not only inside Syria, but in Iraq, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East.

This incipient regional conflict could rapidly spiral out of control as the Obama administration launches its war on Syria.



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