

Paris conference on Syria: US, European allies renew push for regime-change

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Top US and European diplomats assembled Sunday in Paris for a two-day meeting of the so-called Friends of Syria group, renewing the push for regime-change in Damascus.

The talks came amid reports that US officials are preparing renewed shipments of supplies to Syrian Islamist opposition forces. Only four months after nearly going to war with Syria and its allies in Lebanon and Iran to support the Al Qaeda-linked Syrian opposition, the NATO powers are again stoking the sectarian conflicts that are inflaming the region.

The Paris meeting on Sunday focused on pressing the various Islamist militias within the US-backed Syrian opposition to participate in the January 22 “Geneva II” talks. The Geneva talks aim to negotiate a transitional agreement for opposition militias to share power with the current Syrian regime, paving the way for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave office.

The Friends of Syria countries—the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan—issued a statement after Sunday’s meeting. Asserting that “Assad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria,” the statement addressed the Syrian opposition: “We invite them to form, as soon as possible, a delegation of opposition forces to participate in the political process.”

The role of the opposition as the chosen instrument of US-backed regime-change underscores the reactionary role of pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization in the US, France’s New Anti-capitalist Party, and Germany’s Marx21 group, which have hailed the Syrian opposition as carrying out a “revolution.”

After meeting with Syrian National Coalition (SNC) leader Ahmad Jarba, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared: “I am confident personally that the Syrian

opposition will come to Geneva. It was a very constructive meeting today [with Jarba]. I am confident that he and others will be in Geneva. I am counting on both parties to come together.”

He added, “With respect to the Assad regime, we have been told from day one they are allegedly prepared to negotiate.”

Given that Jarba and the imperialist-backed SNC have only tenuous connections to the Islamist opposition groups fighting inside Syria, which have bitterly opposed a negotiated settlement, it is unclear whether Jarba will get the opposition to join the Geneva talks. *Al Jazeera’s* correspondent in Paris, Jacky Rowland, noted that Syrian opposition officials had not made any statements supporting Kerry’s claims that they would attend the talks. “It is by no means certain,” Rowland wrote, “that the Coalition is ready to say ‘yes’ to that invitation.”

Jarba did indicate, however, that he was pleased by the tone of the discussions and the renewed focus on regime-change. “We all agreed there is no future for Bashar al-Assad and his family in Syria. His departure is inevitable,” he said.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said, “It’s the regime of Bashar al-Assad that is feeding terrorism. We must bring that regime to an end.”

Such statements by Fabius are a cynical attempt to cover up a politically criminal policy being pursued by the major imperialist powers, which have deliberately stoked up a sectarian civil war in Syria in which NATO and the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms have relied on Sunni Islamist terrorist organizations tied to Al Qaeda. Having nearly gone to war to rescue these forces from defeat last September, the US and its co-conspirators are moving to reorganize the Al Qaeda-linked opposition so as to align it more directly with American foreign policy.

Fighting has erupted between rival factions of the Islamist opposition near the northern cities of Aleppo,

Idlib and Raqqa. The London-based, pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that the fighting has claimed 697 lives, including 100 civilians, of whom 21 were executed.

It appears the fighting is taking place between US-backed Islamist factions and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has fallen out of favor with Washington, particularly after joining a Sunni uprising against the US-backed regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in neighboring Iraq.

This fighting has laid the basis for Washington to resume its direct aid to the Syrian opposition. The US announced December 11 that it had suspended its official aid shipments, carried out in parallel with covert weapons shipments overseen by the CIA, after it emerged that US aid to the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) had gone to a collection of Al Qaeda-linked militias called the Islamic Front. Washington is now preparing to restart shipments to the FSA following the Islamic Front's attacks on ISIS forces.

Washington is arming the FSA even though, as an anonymous senior administration official told the *New York Times*, "There's no way to say 100 percent that it would not end up in the hands of the Islamic Front."

While the US presents its actions as part of an effort to limit the influence of Al Qaeda in the US-backed opposition, it appears the main beneficiaries will be ISIS' rivals, the Islamic Front and the Al Nusra Front. Al Nusra has itself openly pledged loyalty to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri

Noting that the FSA would not benefit from the revival of US aid as much as Al Nusra, *Le Nouvel Observateur* cited Romain Caillet of the French Institute for the Near East in Beirut, who said: "Al Nusra is playing a double role. It is taking over various headquarters, largely without violence, and is waiting to see how things turn out to know whether they will keep their positions or give them up. Many fighters have already pledged allegiance to Al Nusra."

Caillet added, "If ISIS really disappeared in Syria, all its foreign fighters who are not killed, captured, or have not fled the country will go over to Al Nusra, if only to protect their families, as many came with their wives and children."

US imperialism's strategy of fomenting regime-change across the Middle East by manipulating alliances with Sunni Islamist forces—which it embarked on after the working class toppled the Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in 2011—has devastated the region. Having torn

Syria to shreds, it is threatening to engulf the entire Middle East in a broad war.

Fighting between the Syrian regime and the US-backed opposition has devastated Syria and the region, forcing 2.3 million people to flee to refugee camps outside Syria and internally displacing some 6.5 million people. Taken together, this represents over a third of Syria's population of 22.4 million people.

Speaking on the spreading social catastrophe inside Syria, UN humanitarian affairs chief Baroness Valerie Amos told the BBC: "The sick and wounded have not been able to leave, we've not been able to get food in. There are reports of people on the brink of starvation, including in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp close to the center of Damascus."

Fighting also continues to escalate in Iraq, particularly in Sunni-majority areas of western Iraq, near the border with Syria, and US officials are considering a renewed invasion of the country already devastated by the 2003 invasion. The ongoing fighting, *USA Today* observed, is "raising the possibility of a major war in the Middle East with untold death, global oil shocks and, eventually, US military intervention."

Yesterday, 22 people were killed and more than 80 wounded in a series of car bombings and shootings in Baghdad and in Tuz Khurmato, in northern Iraq's Salaheddin province.

The Iraqi regime is massing its forces outside of Fallujah, where Sunni Islamist forces have taken over the city and are holding it against the Maliki government, to whom the Obama administration is rushing military equipment and assistance.

Former US army intelligence officer Jessica Lewis told AFP, "The US Marines had difficulty assaulting Fallujah in 2004. The Iraqi army is not prepared to sustain a comparable fight." In an assault, she added, "Iraqi security forces will most likely level Fallujah by overusing artillery and stand-off weapons to suppress the threat."



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