

## US targets Syria for stepped-up aggression

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While media commentators claim that the Obama administration's focus on Ukraine and Russia means a shift away from the Middle East and the ongoing civil war against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the opposite is true.

Provocations that can be used as a suitable *casus belli* for an intervention against Syria are once again being planned by the United States and its regional allies.

The expulsion of opposition forces from Yabrud ends the last armed opposition presence in the Qalamoun region between Lebanon and Damascus and Homs. This brings to 70 percent the population under government control, concentrated along the western northwest corridor. But vast swathes of the less populated parts of the country are under the control of different Islamist groups made up of fighters from around the world battling against each other for supremacy. In other words, there are a series of wars within the wider proxy war that has broken up Syria into numerous entities and wrecked its economy.

On Friday, opposition forces made new claims about the use of poison gas by government forces in Jobar, a neighbourhood in the capital Damascus, with a video supposedly showing an unconscious man being treated by medics.

The allegation come just days after Syria's United Nations envoy, Bashar Ja'afari, wrote to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the UN Security Council saying that his government had intercepted communications between "terrorists" that showed a man named Abu Nadir was secretly distributing gas masks in the rebel-held Jobar area. The letter said that this information "confirms that armed terrorist groups are preparing to use toxic gas in Jobar quarter and other areas, in order to accuse the Syrian government of having committed such an act of terrorism."

Last December, a UN inquiry reported that sarin gas had probably been used in Jobar in August and in several other locations, including in the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Ghouta, where hundreds of people were killed.

*London On Review Sunday, Books* the lengthy article by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh that reported that the attack in Ghouta was carried out by Syrian "rebel" forces acting at the behest of Turkey, for the purpose of providing a pretext for a US attack on Syria. (See: "New exposé by Seymour Hersh: Turkey staged gas attack to provoke US war on Syria")

The Obama administration had sought to use the incident as the basis for a planned military strike against Syria, but this was subsequently called off due to mass popular opposition and divisions both at home and among its allies in Europe.

According to the *Washington Post*, current US measures being used in Syria include doubling the number of fighters to be trained in US-run camps in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Henceforth the CIA, not the military, is to take charge. Its mission will be "counterterrorism"—apparently against the very groups it has sponsored for three years. The US is to allow Saudi Arabia to supply opposition forces with "manpads" anti-aircraft missile launchers. Washington will also provide more financial resources for opposition forces on Syria's borders.

Officials say they have a plan for the "moderate opposition" to supply it with weapons and weaken extremist and terrorist forces that have turned up in Syria. Such support is to be channelled through Washington's regional allies, whose function is to provide the necessary pretexts for military intervention against Syria.

Turkey has begun openly providing military support for the opposition along its southern border, despite the widespread hostility among the Turkish population to any involvement in Syria. According to the Israeli web site close to intelligence sources, DEBKAfile, Turkey is giving Syrian rebel forces, including the Al Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front, passage through its territory to attack the Syrian coastal area around Latakia, a stronghold of the Alawite sect to which many of the clique around Assad belong.

On March 23, Turkish air defences shot down a Syrian

plane overflying the battle zone that Ankara claimed had entered Turkish air space. This was a blatant lie as the plane fell to the ground in Syria. At the very least, this suggests that Ankara is intent on establishing a de facto no-fly zone on its own over the Syrian border region in support of the rebel forces.

On March 30, during his local election victory speech, Prime Minister Racep Erdogan declared, “We are in a state of war with Syria.”

This follows revelations that Turkish officials have been planning an attack on their own forces to manufacture a pretext to attack Syria contained in a leaked audio recording, posted to YouTube, of a meeting between top Turkish diplomats and intelligence officials, including Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT). They discussed the possibility of organizing an attack from inside Syria across the Turkish-Syrian border, or on the Tomb of Suleiman Shah. Under the 1921 Treaty of Ankara between Turkey and France, then the colonial power in Syria, this tomb is a piece of sovereign Turkish territory inside Syria, guarded by Turkish forces. Ankara banned access to YouTube inside Turkey.

Leaked telephone calls make clear that this and other plans are false flag

operations being planned in order to provide the justification for Turkish military intervention against Syria and to deflect the mounting domestic opposition to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Turkey has already witnessed blowback, with armed clashes between the police and gunmen belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) on the streets of Istanbul, wounding three police officers, when counterterrorism units raided a house suspected of hosting an ISIS cell. Last year, an attack originally attributed to pro-Syrian regime forces in Hatay province that killed dozens was the work of anti-Syrian forces. These incidents indicate the scale of the reverberations of the prolonged Syrian war, which has already destabilised Lebanon and Iraq.

Israel too is upping its support for opposition forces. It has carried out several raids in Syria, ostensibly aimed at arms consignments to Hezbollah. It also operates field hospitals inside Syria and has brought—and returned—more than 600 opposition fighters into the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in 1967 and annexed in 1981, for treatment. Such an operation could not have been carried out without the Israeli army establishing communications systems and frequent contacts with local militias, as it did

in southern Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s. With the Israeli army protecting their backs, these militias have battled Syrian regime troops based in the southwest of the country.

Jordan provides an “operations room” in Amman where Jordanian military and intelligence officers coordinate military assistance to local rebel groups alongside Saudi and Western advisors, protecting the rebels’ southern front.

Israel is said to be ready to pay compensation to Turkey for the eight Turkish citizens killed in the Mavi Marmara aid ship to Gaza in May 2010, paving the way for the resumption of diplomatic relations and military cooperation between the two countries.

Saudi Arabia issued a royal decree banning Saudi citizens from going to fight in Syria and designated a number of organizations—including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra that it, along with Qatar, had earlier promoted—as terrorist groups. It is part of a broader move to re-brand the opposition forces as “moderates” and to prevent blowback at home.

Once again, the US is threatening to use the appalling plight of the Syrian people caught up in the fighting as the pretext for military action against the Assad regime. More than 150,000 have died, and at least a third of the country’s 23 million people have been forced to flee their homes. Nearly 2 million have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.

Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the UN, argued for a Security Council resolution that would have “meaningful consequences on the ground”—by which she meant one that could be used to justify the use of military force. Crucially, this pretext is particularly attractive to the pseudo-left layer that has been won to the cause of “humanitarian” imperialism over the past two decades. Danny Postel, a regular contributor to pseudo-left journals such as the *Nation* and *In These Times*, wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* with Nader Hashemi entitled, “Use Force to Save Starving Syrians.”



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