

Plan B: CIA prepares to arm Syrian “rebels” with anti-aircraft weapons

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The CIA, working in conjunction with Washington’s principal allies in the Middle East, including the governments in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, is preparing a so-called “Plan B” involving a dramatic escalation in the arming of Western-backed “rebels” fighting the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Citing senior US officials, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the plan was directed at “providing vetted rebel units with weapons systems that would help them in directing attacks against Syrian regime aircraft and artillery positions.”

Clearly, the same weapons could be used to shoot down Russian aircraft, which have proven decisive in providing air support for Syrian government forces in taking back territory from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Al Nusra Front and other Western-backed Islamist militias.

The plan being hatched by the White House and the CIA dramatically escalates the threat of a military confrontation between the US and Russia, the world’s two largest nuclear powers.

“Plan B” is supposed to go into effect once Washington reaches the conclusion that its “Plan A” has failed. “Plan A” being the current effort to secure the collaboration of the United Nations, Russia, Iran and elements within the Assad government itself to achieve by means of a negotiated settlement what it has proven unable to secure on the battlefield over the last five years: regime change in Damascus.

“If the cease-fire collapses, if the negotiations don’t go anywhere, and we’re back to full throttle civil war, all bets will be off,” an Obama administration official told the *Journal*. “The outside patrons will double and triple down, throwing everything they can into Syria, including much more lethal weaponry.”

The leaking of the CIA plan, which had all the earmarks of a deliberate trial balloon for a US military escalation, came as US officials charged that the Assad government is threatening to disrupt peace talks set to resume in Geneva this week by pursuing a fresh military offensive around the Syrian city of Aleppo.

A cessation of hostilities agreement that went into effect at the end of February does not cover either ISIS or the Nusra Front, which are both defined by both Washington and the UN as terrorist organizations.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power led the administration’s charge on this issue. Referring to reports of a planned Syrian army offensive, she stated, “That would be devastating, for the people of Aleppo of course, but also to this intricate process where the cessation of hostilities, humanitarian access and political negotiations are all related to one another.”

Power and other administration officials are essentially indicting the Syrian government for going after the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, on the grounds that it works in close proximity, and close collaboration, with other Islamist militias that the US and its allies have armed and supported.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters on Monday that the problem was that the groups backed by Washington are “not far apart and they’re not clearly delineated” from the Nusra Front forces in Aleppo and elsewhere. The reality is that these forces operate in alliance with the Syrian Al Qaeda branch, which, together with ISIS, constitutes the main armed forces fighting the Syrian government. Washington is determined to maintain these forces as a proxy army in its bid for regime change.

Russia has responded by blaming the uptick in fighting on a buildup by the Islamist militias aimed at

encircling and blockading Aleppo. This operation has been facilitated by the flow of thousands of foreign fighters and large amounts of weaponry across the border from Turkey, Washington's NATO ally.

The message sent by the leaked report on the CIA preparations for "Plan B" is clear. If the Islamist militias are able to sufficiently disrupt the cessation of hostilities and upend the negotiations in Geneva, they will be rewarded with powerful new weaponry from the US and its allies.

According to the *Journal* report, the Obama White House is still deliberating on a "list of specific Plan B weapons systems."

Saudi Arabia and Turkey have reportedly both pressed for the provision of Manpads, man-portable air-defense systems. These weapons, such as US Stinger shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, can be used to bring down low flying warplanes and helicopters.

They can just as easily be turned against civilian passenger planes as military aircraft, and, given the so-called "overlap" between the Syrian Al Qaeda forces and the Islamist militias backed by Washington and its allies, this is a strong probability. In the past, weapons funneled to so-called CIA-vetted "moderates" have quickly fallen into the hands of the Al Nusra Front.

The CIA is supposedly looking at the possibility of providing less mobile antiaircraft weapons, the *Journal* reports.

The provision of such weapons to the Islamist "rebels" would be a flagrant violation of international law. It will likewise serve to prolong and intensify the bloodbath inflicted upon the Syrian people as a result of the US-backed regime change operation, which has already claimed well over a quarter of a million lives and driven roughly half the population from their homes.

The criminal US policy being elaborated under the guise of Plan B poses the direct threat of a far more dangerous military clash between the US and Russia.

The Obama administration's willingness to risk such a confrontation was already demonstrated last November with Turkey's deliberate ambush of a Russian SU-24 fighter bomber near the Syrian-Turkish border.

US imperialism is not prepared to accept Russia's military intervention in Syria consolidating a pro-Moscow regime in Damascus, with or without Assad.

US geopolitical and military strategy is aimed at preventing Russia from posing a challenge to Washington's drive to impose American hegemony in the Middle East, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. To that end, it is preparing an escalation of the Syrian conflict that could ignite a third world war between nuclear-armed powers.



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