

# State Department “dissent” memo backs escalation of regime-change war in Syria

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The leaking of a so-called “dissent channel cable”—a classified memo signed by over 50 mid-level State Department officials calling for the Obama administration to re-direct its military intervention in Syria to a war against the government of President Bashar al-Assad—has ratcheted up tensions between Washington and Moscow.

The memo, issued under a State Department procedure allowing its functionaries to express disagreement with standing policy, called for “targeted military strikes” against the Assad government, employing a “judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hard-nosed US-led diplomatic process.”

US air strikes, according to this thesis, would force the Assad government to halt military activities against CIA-backed “rebels” and force it to submit to a negotiating process directed at replacing it with a puppet regime of Washington’s choosing.

The memo couches the call for a major escalation of US military aggression in the phony “human rights” rhetoric previously employed in relation to both Syria and the US-NATO war for regime-change in Libya in 2011.

“The moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war is evident and unquestionable,” the memo states. “The status quo in Syria will continue to present increasingly dire, if not disastrous, humanitarian, diplomatic and terrorism-related challenges.”

“We are not advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with Russia,” the document states, adding, however, that the signatories “recognize that the risk of further deterioration in US-Russian relations is significant” and that US military escalation “may yield a number of second-order effects.”

The duplicity and hypocrisy of this thesis is breathtaking. The “five years of brutal war” were imposed upon Syria by a massive regime-change

operation carried out by Washington and its regional allies in utter disregard for the lives and well-being of the Syrian people.

US imperialism sought to achieve its aims by acting together with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to fund and arm Islamist militias, the most influential of them linked to Al Qaeda, as proxy forces, with tens of thousands of so-called foreign fighters funneled in to serve as troops in a war to topple Assad.

The failure of this operation, due in part to the intervention of the Russian military on the side of the Syrian government and, in no small measure, to the revulsion felt by broad masses of Syrians toward the reactionary Islamist gunmen backed by Washington, is what underlies the demand for a US military escalation.

From the outset, the US intervention in Syria was directed at advancing far broader strategic aims, principally preparing for confrontations with both Iran and Russia by depriving them of their principal ally in the Arab world. Thus, despite the protest that they are not “advocating for a slippery slope”—whoever has?—the signatories to the document are clearly prepared to provoke a military confrontation with Moscow.

The publication of reports on the leaked memo came just one day after US Secretary of State John Kerry, on a visit to Norway, stepped up threats to Moscow over Syria. “Russia needs to understand that our patience is not infinite, in fact it is very limited with whether or not Assad is going to be held accountable,” he said.

Significantly, while the *New York Times* acknowledged that it had been handed the internal memo by a State Department official, department spokesman John Kirby Friday insisted that there was no interest in uncovering who was responsible for the leak or holding them accountable. For his part, Kerry described the memo as “an important statement.”

The memo rekindles a simmering dispute within the

administration that has divided the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House since August 2013, when President Barack Obama backed off from a threat to launch air strikes against the Assad government over fabricated charges that it was responsible for a chemical weapons attack. Instead, the White House accepted a Russian-brokered deal for Damascus to destroy its chemical weapons stockpiles, angering those who saw this as a missed opportunity to escalate the US war for regime-change.

Kerry, like his predecessor as secretary of state, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, disagreed with Obama's decision and reportedly continued to press for stepped-up US military action in Syria directed against the government.

In a further indication of mounting US-Russian tensions over Syria, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter Friday accused the Russian military of carrying out air strikes in the south of the country that allegedly hit CIA-trained "rebels." He denounced Moscow, charging that its forces were not directed at fighting ISIS but had "mostly supported Assad and fueled the civil war."

Carter added that a hotline established to guard against unintended conflicts between US and Russian warplanes flying over Syria "wasn't professionally used" by the Russians. Apparently, US officials had tried to use the phone to get the Russians to stop bombing the CIA-backed "rebels."

The Russian government responded to the charge by stating that it was difficult to distinguish between the US-backed "rebels" and fighters of the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, because the two fought side by side.

This same essential point was candidly acknowledged by Anthony Cordesman, a long-time Pentagon adviser from the Center for International and Strategic Studies, in a report last week: "The United States still has yet to show that it can create any meaningful US-supported Arab rebel force," he wrote. "So far, its support of such rebels has largely had the effect of helping to arm the Al Nusra Front (an al Qaeda affiliate)..."

While promoting its intervention in Iraq and Syria as a struggle against terrorism, the principal purpose of US threats against Russia is to prevent it from enabling Syrian government forces to deal a decisive defeat against the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, which, together with ISIS, constitutes the main fighting forces in the war for regime-change.

The State Department memo and mounting US threats

were denounced by Russian officials. Alexei Pushkov, the head of the foreign affairs committee in the lower house of the Russian parliament, described the memo as "kind of an ultimatum signaling the acknowledgement that the US is unable to achieve its goal by diplomatic and political means and so there is a need to switch to military methods." He added, "This is a signal to us, a warning to Assad and the international community that there are people in the US who call to shift the fire from the Islamic State to the government of Assad."

Meanwhile, in Washington, President Obama held talks in the Oval Office with Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman. Afterwards, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, traveling with the prince, told the media that "There should be a more robust intervention," in Syria and reiterated Saudi support for what has been referred to in US ruling circles as "Plan B," including the provision of surface-to-air missiles to the Islamist militias and the use of Western air power to create a no-fly zone.

While the Obama administration insisted that there are no plans to shift US military operations in Syria to directly target the Assad government, the rumblings in the State Department may well be a warning of what is to come after the presidential election, no matter whether the Democrats or Republicans emerge as the victors. Traditionally, US governments have put off major new military operations until after national elections in order to prevent war and militarism from becoming political issues placed before the American people.

However, both parties' presumptive presidential candidates, Clinton and Trump, have called for an escalation of US military operations in Syria, including the establishment of a no-fly zone, a measure that would directly challenge Russia's air power in Syria.

A US escalation of the Syrian bloodbath and the danger of a direct military confrontation between the world's two major nuclear powers are likely to emerge as ever more direct threats after November.



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