

In bid to save proxy forces in Syria, US discusses pact with Russia

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United States Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow Thursday evening for discussions over a US-Russian military pact in relation to Syria. The pact had been proposed by the Obama administration in early July.

The Obama administration is, in words at least, holding out the offer of a common front against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. The White House proposal includes the establishment of a joint US-Russian command center, located in the US-allied Kingdom of Jordan, which would run "integrated operations," supposedly coordinating military and intelligence operations in Syria.

Since Russia launched its bombing campaign in Syria in September 2015, Washington has accused it of focusing on the so-called moderate opposition, elements armed and funded by the CIA and US regional allies, who are in most cases in alliance with the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate and encamped directly alongside it. Moscow's repeated requests for the Pentagon to provide coordinates for the so-called moderates, so that it could avoid striking them, have until now invariably been rejected. In exchange for the proposed American collaboration, Russia would scale back its bombing campaign, insist that Assad end most operations by the Syrian Air Force and accept a military cooperation agreement that would give Washington some degree of control over the targeting of Russian strikes.

In comments to media, the two, Kerry and the Russian president, issued dubious assurances that an agreement, in some form, was at hand. Putin expressed "hope" that "progress" and "possible headway" would emerge from the talks.

"Hopefully, we'll be able to make some genuine progress that is measurable and implementable and that can make a difference in the course of events in Syria," Secretary Kerry said.

Whatever promises are made by the White House, it is impossible to believe that the US will engage in a serious joint bombardment with Russia against Al Nusra. Such a campaign would devastate the leading anti-Assad formation, closing the book on the insurgency fomented against Damascus by Washington.

According to Faisal Itani of the Atlantic Council, "combined attacks against Nusra would effectively end the Syrian opposition, cementing Mr. Assad's grip on power."

The Nusra group has functioned as an instrument of the US war plan since the beginning of the imperialist-orchestrated insurgency in 2011. Al Nusra has emerged as "one of the most effective anti-Assad forces," and the proposed deal would "bring American firepower to bear against the strongest anti-Assad military force and a sometime partner of Washington's allies," the *New York Times* reported on Friday.

The White House proposals represent a tactical maneuver, aimed at salvaging the remnants of the anti-Assad forces, the backbone of which is composed of ISIS and the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra fighters.

Nonetheless, the fact that the Obama administration has offered such a deal is significant in itself, powerfully underscoring the disastrous position of the American-backed forces on the ground. The Russian-backed Syrian military is tightening the noose around the American-backed opposition forces, and Syrian Army units are encircling opposition militias inside the key city of Aleppo, trapping hundreds of thousands of civilians in the process.

A US-Russian coordination pact would enable Washington to manage and constrain the Russian air campaign, in a last-ditch effort to preserve some portion of the opposition until after the upcoming 2016 US elections. Once the political hurdle of the election has passed, a newly installed presidential administration will have a free hand to escalate the war, renewing the push against Damascus through fresh deployments of US ground troops and an intensified air campaign.

Whatever the twists and turns in its short-term policy, the American ruling class will never willingly accept the re-stabilization of the Assad government, or indeed the consolidation of any Russian-aligned regime in Damascus, which Washington views as an obstacle to US hegemony in the Middle East.

Factions of the US elite clearly remain committed to the violent overthrow of Assad, and deeply hostile to any compromise with the Putin government. As the *Times* noted Friday, the Obama plan “has generated deep unease at the Pentagon and in some quarters of the State Department.”



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