Threat of US-Russia clash grows after Washington cuts off Syria talks

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In the wake of breaking off bilateral talks with Moscow on efforts to achieve a truce and political settlement in Syria, the Obama administration is reportedly convening a meeting today to consider escalating US military intervention in the war-ravaged country.

The so-called Principals Committee, to be attended by the secretaries of state and defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA director, as well as top White House officials, is being convened amid an increasingly dangerous escalation of tensions between the US and Russia, the world's two largest nuclear powers.

The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday that the meeting would consider classified proposals that include "bombing Syrian air force runways using cruise missiles and other long-range weapons fired from coalition planes and ships, as well as other acts of military aggression."

An unnamed administration official is quoted by the *Post* as reporting that, in order to placate White House concerns over launching such direct military attacks against another country without authorization from the United Nations Security Council, it has been proposed that the strikes be carried out "covertly and without public acknowledgment."

According to the official cited by the *Post*, both the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have already "expressed support for such 'kinetic' options." Another unnamed senior administration official told the *Post* that both the Pentagon and the CIA were backing such a military option because "the fall of Aleppo would undermine America's counterterrorism goals in Syria."

This is of course a propaganda pretext for the launching of another direct US military intervention in the Middle East. What the US military and intelligence apparatus really fears is that the Russian-backed Syrian government offensive to overrun eastern Aleppo will deprive the so-called "rebels," who have been armed, funded and directly paid by the CIA and US regional allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—of their last stronghold in western Syria's major population centers. This would spell a crushing reversal for the five-year-old war for regime change orchestrated by Washington.

The claim that this would "undermine America's counterterrorism goals" only underscores the fraud of the US war on terror. The principal fighting force inside Aleppo is made up of the long-time Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda and allied Islamist militias.

While the *Post* article suggests that President Barack Obama will likely reject the proposal for military action, the combined pressure of the CIA and the military command may well force a shift in policy. A full meeting of the National Security Council, including the probable participation of Obama, is expected as early as next weekend, when a decision would likely be made.

At the same time, Russia's Defense Ministry announced Tuesday that it is beefing up Russian air defense systems inside Syria, deploying an advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile battery to protect the Russian naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus. Given that the Islamist "rebels" have no air force, such weapons systems are intended to raise the cost of any US strikes on Russian and Syrian government positions.

The breakdown of the Syrian ceasefire talks and the menacing military escalations by both sides are the product not merely of individual truce violations. On the US side, these were egregious, with the US-backed militias carrying out hundreds of attacks. Even more decisive was the September 17 US bombing of a Syrian government outpost near the town of Deir ez-Zor, which killed and wounded nearly 200 troops. While the Pentagon claimed this airstrike was an accident, Syria has charged that it was intentional. It served to blow up the ceasefire deal and prevent the implementation of a joint targeting and intelligence-sharing agreement with Russia that the US military command openly opposed.

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Underlying the clashes over the ceasefire are the diametrically opposed aims pursued in Syria by US imperialism on the one hand and the Russian government of Vladimir Putin on the other. Washington is intervening in Syria not to fight terrorism or champion human rights, but to further its longstanding drive to assert unchallengeable US hegemony over the Middle East and its vast energy resources, and to deny access to both Russia and China. It is prepared to prolong the bloodshed as long as necessary to bring about regime change and prevent Russia from consolidating a government under current President Bashar al-Assad, or a successor that is amenable to Russian interests.

For its part, the Putin government sees Syria as part of a broader struggle against the US drive to militarily encircle Russia. It fears that a successful US regime-change operation in Syria would serve as a stepping stone toward direct intervention in Russia, including through the unleashing of CIA-funded Islamist fighters drawn from Russia's Caucasus region. A US-backed client regime in Damascus could help funnel such separatist forces, already trained on the Syrian battlefield, back into Russia to serve as Western proxies in a campaign to destabilize and ultimately dismember the Russian Federation.

While there was a defensive element to Moscow's intervention, in the final analysis it is directed at defending not the interests of the masses in either Russia or Syria, but rather those of the ruling oligarchy that seized its wealth and power in the criminal operations that accompanied the Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism and dissolution of the Soviet Union a quarter century ago. The methods being utilized in Syria, including in the bloody siege of Aleppo, reflect those class interests.

At the same time, the denunciation on the part of the US government of the loss of civilian life in the Russian-Syrian bombing of Aleppo is utterly hypocritical. After 15 years of waging aggressive war in the Middle East at the cost of over a million deaths and the destruction of entire societies, Washington is the last one to deliver lectures on "war crimes."

Moreover, there is ample indication that the US military is itself preparing operations that will prove as bloody and punishing as the current siege of Aleppo. UN officials estimate that as many as a million people may be driven from their homes in a US-backed Iraqi offensive, expected as early as next month, against the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, which is under the control of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

Washington's NATO ally in the region, Turkey, has issued public warnings about the upcoming Mosul offensive. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim described US plans as "dangerous," adding, "Our partners' plans for the Mosul operation are not transparent." Yildirim warned that the use of Shia and Kurdish militias to take the city would "lead to a new fire being stoked in the region."

Friction between Ankara and Washington has mounted in relation to the US use of Syrian Kurdish separatist militias as their main proxy force in northern Syria. Turkey is determined to drive back the Kurdish forces and prevent them from consolidating an autonomous territory on Turkey's border.

Prime Minister Yildirim vowed that Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, which sent troops into Syria beginning at the end of August, would continue in order to drive back the US-backed Kurdish forces and carve out a 5,000-square-kilometer "safe zone" around El-Bab in the north of Syria.

Separately, another Turkish official, Defense Minister Fikri Isik, commented Wednesday that in the event of a major US-Russian confrontation in Syria, "Turkey always protects its own interests."

Russian President Putin is scheduled to meet with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Turkey on October 10, the first such visit since Turkish warplanes shot down a Russian jet on the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015.

Turkey's tensions with Washington and pursuit of its own regional ambitions in Syria only serve to heighten the geopolitical tensions that could turn the Syrian war for regime change into a new world war.

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