

US steps up anti-Russian rhetoric over Syria as EU foreign ministers meet

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17 October 2016

Talks over Syria were held in London Sunday between United States Secretary of State John Kerry and European Union (EU) foreign ministers.

The US is arming Islamist militias seeking to remove President Bashar al-Assad, while Russia is backing the Syrian government, its key ally in the Middle East.

The London talks were nominally convened by UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, but representatives of 10 countries gathered to hear Kerry's report from his previous day's talks in Lausanne, Switzerland with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Present in London were Johnson's counterparts from France, Germany and Italy—Jean-Marc Ayrault, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Paolo Gentiloni. In addition, there were representatives from a number of Gulf States that play a key role in backing the militias fighting to remove Assad.

Present at the Lausanne meeting, which lasted four-and-a-half hours without reaching any agreement, were representatives from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. EU representatives did not attend at the insistence of Russia. Lavrov stated that the only basis for a ceasefire in Syria was the separation of the so-called "moderate" Syrian rebels from the Islamist Jabhat Fatah al Sham, previously known as the al-Nusra Front.

In the runup to the weekend talks, Johnson, of the ruling Conservative Party, had led calls, with the backing of the British Labour Party right wing, for Moscow to be indicted for "war crimes" in Syria, and had described Russia as a "pariah" state. He told parliament it was not realistic for the opposition fighters in eastern Aleppo, who are seeking to overthrow Assad, to disentangle themselves from al-Nusra in advance of a ceasefire. The London talks would include discussions on further "military

options," he said.

On Sunday, ahead of the talks, the *Guardian* reported that Johnson had "formed an axis with the French government and the US secretary of state to consider the longer-term viability of imposing a no-bombing zone in Syria." It asserted, "A no-bombing zone would cover the whole of Syria and would prohibit bombing from all aircraft. Monitoring would be conducted by existing western assets in the region, with any breach of the ceasefire leading to a reprisal on Syrian, not Russian, targets, such as air runways or regime installations."

In the press conference after the foreign ministers' meeting, following a few cursory remarks by Johnson, only Kerry spoke. Johnson described events in Syria as an "appalling slaughter" perpetrated by "the Assad regime and its puppeteers in the form of the Russians and the Iranians."

Kerry described the situation in Syria as "the largest of humanitarian disasters" since World War Two, and said, "We are considering additional sanctions [against Assad] and we are also making clear that President [Barack] Obama has not taken any options off the table." He warned that the Syria conflict risked not only "lighting a fire" under a larger Middle Eastern war, but also a confrontation "between superpowers."

Kerry pledged that the US would continue to oppose Assad and Russia, even in the event of Aleppo falling to government forces, resulting in the Assad regime's control over the second largest city as well as the capital, Damascus. "The Russians should understand, and Assad needs to understand, that that does not end the war," he said.

Kerry's bellicose comments underscore the White House's strategy of demonising Russia in an attempt to create a climate in which it can justify a confrontation

with Moscow. Speaking on “Meet the Press” on Sunday, US Vice President Joseph Biden said the US could retaliate against Russia, which he accused of a series of cyberattacks targeting the Democratic National Committee and other political institutions.

NBC had reported on Friday that the US was preparing a CIA-led cyberattack on Russia. On Sunday, Biden said, “We’re sending a message. We have the capacity to do it... It will be at the time of our choosing—and under the circumstances that have the greatest impact.”

Obama met with his foreign policy advisers at the National Security Council Friday to discuss the US stepping up its military efforts in Syria. According to a Reuters report, “One set of options includes direct US military action such as air strikes on Syrian military bases, munitions depots or radar and anti-aircraft bases, said one official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.”

While US officials “said they consider it unlikely that Obama will order US air strikes on Syrian government targets,” an alternative was to allow US allies “to provide US-vetted rebels with more sophisticated weapons...”

The London talks were in anticipation of further discussions over the Syrian conflict between EU foreign ministers being held today in Luxembourg. Later this week, a two-day summit in Brussels is to centre on the EU’s broader relationship with Russia.

The Obama administration is doing everything possible to build support for stepped-up military action against Assad that would likely mean a direct confrontation with Russia. Central to this aim is securing a common position among the European powers, which are not all in agreement with US policy over Syria or Russia.

Ahead of today’s meeting of EU foreign ministers, *Foreign Policy* magazine revealed that under the pressure of the US and its main allies, EU foreign ministers are planning to formally and explicitly admonish Russia for “supporting the Syrian government’s deadly assault on Aleppo, an attack that ‘may amount to war crimes.’” The article reveals, “An earlier draft of the EU statement did not include a direct reference to Russia, but has been added at the insistence of the French, British and German governments.”

The article notes that the ministers are “also expected

to support the imposition of sanctions on as many as 20 Syrian government officials who have had a role in the bombardment.”

The article cites Jeff Rathke, a former State Department official who is now employed in the development of US strategies on Europe at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He said, “As the US appears to be reviewing its options, it’s important to send a message that Russia could face costs for its actions. So the more clear Europe is about a hardening line, the better.”

Another dilemma facing US imperialism is the deep opposition within the world population, especially in Europe, to its war drive. Asked by a journalist from *Sky News* when he would say “enough is enough” and not be “ beholden to Russia,” Kerry acknowledged this opposition, stating, “I haven’t seen a big appetite in Europe of people to go to war. I don’t see the parliaments of European countries ready to declare war. I don’t see a lot of countries deciding that that’s the better solution here.”

Notwithstanding Kerry’s comments, the goal of the US is to assert its control over the entire Eurasian land mass. It is determined to press ahead with confronting and defeating Russia militarily in order to achieve this, presenting humanity with the prospect of a devastating war between two nuclear-armed powers. No matter the outcome of this week’s talks, the US will respond even more aggressively in order to secure its goals.



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