

Obama administration split on “Plan B” for Syria intervention

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The Obama administration’s National Security Council has discussed proposals for a “Plan B” in Syria, involving a major escalation of the five-year-old US intervention aimed at toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

“Plan B”—meant to signal Washington’s response to its failure to secure its goal of “regime change” by means of a negotiated agreement with Russia, the main ally of the Assad government—would involve significantly increasing the supply of weapons to the so-called rebels, a collection of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias. This would include the provision of anti-aircraft weapons capable of shooting down not only Syrian government warplanes, but also those of the Russian air force.

The secret talks were convened in the context of the breakdown of a short-lived ceasefire agreement brokered between Washington and Moscow and the prospect of a Russian-backed Syrian government offensive overrunning the last urban stronghold of the Islamist forces in eastern Aleppo.

According to a report published Monday in the *Washington Post*, the National Security Council met at the White House October 14 to hear the proposals, but “neither approved nor rejected” them, reflecting sharp divisions within the US government and its military and intelligence complex.

Identified as strong supporters of “Plan B” were both US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and CIA Director John Brennan. According to the *Post*, they and other advocates of escalation argued that the “rebels” had to be reinforced because they constitute “the only force in Syria capable of prolonging the war and possibly pushing Moscow to abandon Assad as part of a political solution.”

The language is significant. It identifies a major

strategic goal of US imperialism as that of “prolonging” a war that has already killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions.

Carter is said to have advocated a “doubling down” of the CIA program in order “to inflict higher costs on Moscow for its intervention” in support of the Assad government.

Opponents of the plan, who apparently now include Secretary of State John Kerry, an earlier advocate of escalation, reportedly argued that an intervention aimed at bringing down Syrian and Russian warplanes would likely end in a direct confrontation between Washington and Moscow.

One senior administration official told the *Post*, “You can’t pretend you can go to war against Assad and not go to war against Russia.”

Another senior US official quoted by the *Post* acknowledged that the so-called Free Syrian Army, which has been armed, trained and paid by the CIA and Pentagon, as well as Washington’s regional allies, is “increasingly dominated by extremists,” i.e., Al Qaeda.

Among the major concerns voiced within US government circles about providing heavy weapons to the “rebels,” and particularly MANPADs, highly portable shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, is that these Al Qaeda-linked forces will just as likely turn them against civilian passenger jets as Russian fighter planes.

The advocates of the escalation, according to the *Post* report, proposed “a compromise in which the CIA and its partners would deliver truck-mounted anti-aircraft weapons that could help rebel units but would be difficult for a terrorist group to conceal and use against civilian aircraft.”

The fact that the heads of both the Pentagon and the CIA are at odds with the White House on the proposed

“Plan B” raises the serious question of whether the powerful US military and intelligence apparatus will not find means to circumvent the administration’s policy in order to further an intervention in which they are deeply invested. One means of doing this would be to use regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, which are already heavily involved in the war for regime change in Syria.

Moreover, it appears certain that an incoming administration led by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton will introduce a change of course of Syria, opting for a more aggressive US military intervention.

In two debates with Republican rival Donald Trump, Clinton has voiced her support for the imposition of a “no-fly zone” in Syria on the pretext of humanitarian protection of civilians. The US military has warned that imposing such a zone would entail a military confrontation with Russia. Clinton herself, as revealed in a 2013 speech she delivered to Goldman Sachs released by WikiLeaks, acknowledged that creating such a zone would require extensive air strikes on government positions in densely populated areas in which “you’re going to kill a lot of Syrians.”

According to earlier reports, there is strong support from both Republican and Democratic wings of the US foreign policy establishment for an escalation in Syria.

Two pieces published in the *Washington Post* give a sense of the criminality of these layers. The first by the *Post*’s foreign policy columnist Josh Rogin and published Monday expresses support for the “interventionist side” of Clinton’s transition team, including “the Center for American Progress, the think tank founded by her campaign chairman, John Podesta, which last week released a report calling for the use of American air power to protect civilians in Syria.”

Rogin concludes the article exhorting Clinton to “accept the security and political risks that come with committing more American resources to ending the slaughter and confronting the regime and its partners.”

In an earlier op-ed piece published Saturday by the *Post*, John Allen, the retired Marine Corps general who headed US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan and was a speaker at the Democratic convention in July, endorsing Hillary Clinton, joined with Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute in lashing out at US policy in Syria, including “our unwillingness to tangle with the

regime, and now with the Russians.”

The piece demands that the US government ratchet up the confrontation with Russia, first by “imposing an escalatory set of economic sanctions” against Moscow.

It continues: “The second option is one the Russians believe the United States will never do: Escalate the conflict. The United States must challenge the status quo and end the regime’s war crimes, by force if necessary.”

Washington, the article argues, “must both accelerate and broaden the provision of lethal and nonlethal assistance” to the so-called rebels. It goes on to advocate the formation of a “coalition of the willing,” the term coined by the Bush administration in preparing the criminal US war in Iraq, “to credibly threaten military actions against Assad’s military infrastructure.”

It acknowledges, “We should expect the possible intentional co-mingling of Syrian and Russian forces and assets,” but insists, “we should not miss the opportunity to hit offending Syrian elements and units.”

The piece concludes, “The credibility of the United States, as the leader and the defender of the free world, must be salvaged from the horrific devastation of Syria.”

The recklessness of such policies, aimed at deliberately provoking military confrontation with Russia, a power that controls the world’s second-largest arsenal of nuclear weapons, is staggering.



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