

US arms Syrian Islamists with surface-to-air missiles

Bill Van Auken

23 November 2016

A US-backed Islamist militia in southern Syria has been armed with portable surface-to-air missiles, so-called manpads. These weapons are capable of shooting down Syrian government aircraft as well as Russian warplanes, which have played a prominent role in providing air support to the Syrian army against the Al Qaeda-linked “rebels.”

The group, the Ansar al-Islam Front, exhibited the weapons, SA-7 Strela-2 missiles, in a video it posted on Sunday, claiming that it had “a good number” of them in its possession. The video, produced by a Dubai-based Syrian opposition propaganda network, shows the Islamists un-crating, assembling and testing the manpads.

“We, in Ansar al-Islam Front, have distributed several points of air defense to counter any attempt by the Syrian warplanes or helicopters, which bomb points in Quneitra Province. We have a good number of these missiles,” one of the Islamists states in the video, according to a translation posted by the web site Middle East Eye.

A second individual, identifying himself as Abu Bilal, tells an interviewer: “We, in Ansar al-Islam Front and factions of the FSA, are distributing equipment and soldiers toward Tal al-Hara, Mashara, Sandaniya and Jabata. And in the coming days you will hear good news from Quneitra and its surroundings.”

The shipping of these portable anti-aircraft missiles to Syria marks a major escalation of the US-backed war for regime-change that has devastated the country for the past five years, leading to the deaths of some 300,000 Syrians.

In September, US officials told the Reuters news agency that, after the breakdown of a brief US-Russian-brokered cessation of hostilities and amid renewed fighting around the northern Syrian city of Aleppo,

Washington might resort to a “Plan B,” giving the green light to Saudi Arabia and Qatar to funnel the portable anti-aircraft missiles to the Syrian Islamists. At the time, however, State Department and administration official spokesmen denied the report.

Whether the delivery of the manpads has been ordered by the Obama White House, the CIA, the Pentagon or some faction within the vast US military and intelligence apparatus it is impossible to say. What is clear, however, is that they are intended to establish new “facts on the ground” in Syria before a Trump administration takes office in January.

Pressure for a US escalation in Syria has mounted since Trump gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* on November 11 in which the president-elect called into question the CIA and Pentagon operations for arming so-called “moderate rebels” in Syria, saying “we have no idea who these people are.”

In a rambling and incoherent statement to the *Journal*, Trump said he had “an opposite view of many people regarding Syria,” adding, “My attitude was you’re fighting Syria, Syria is fighting ISIS, and you have to get rid of ISIS. Russia is now totally aligned with Syria, and now you have Iran, which is becoming powerful, because of us, is aligned with Syria.”

The statement set off alarm bells within the US political establishment, whose predominant layers are committed to a strategy of escalating confrontation with Russia as part of drive to militarily assert US hegemony over the Middle East and, more broadly, the landmass of Eurasia.

The *New York Times* responded with an editorial “The Danger of Going Soft on Russia,” in which it accused Trump of acting as “Putin’s apologist” and insisted, “Since Mr. Trump has refused to criticize the Kremlin, it’s important that Mr. Obama figure out,

before he leaves office, how to punish Russia...”

It would appear that shipping surface-to-air missiles to Syria, raising the prospect of US-backed forces shooting down Russian aircraft and triggering a far wider and more dangerous conflict, is part of this “punishment.”

As yet, Trump has enunciated no clear policy in relation to the conflict in Syria, outside of vows on the campaign trail to “bomb the shit out of ISIS.” At the same time, however, many of those surrounding him, including his vice president-elect Mike Pence and his nominee for CIA director Mike Pompeo, have strongly advocated direct US military intervention against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

The group which received the anti-aircraft weapons, Ansar al-Islam, while apparently counted by Washington as part of the “moderate” opposition in Syria, was previously designated as a terrorist organization by the US and the United Nations, as well as a number of other countries, because of its affiliations with the Al Qaeda network.

It first emerged as an armed group in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, fighting against US occupation troops and later the forces of the US-imposed regime in Baghdad. With the fomenting of the war for regime-change in Syria, it sent its members into that country to fight against the Assad government, thereby winning US backing.

Two years ago, the majority of the group’s leadership announced that it was joining the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), which is supposedly the main target of Washington’s ongoing military intervention in Iraq and Syria. Some elements, apparently including those who have now been armed with manpads, rejected the merger, despite their shared ideology and objectives.

Previously, US officials had warned against supplying such weapons to Syrian “rebels” for fear that they would end up in the hands of Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters and could be turned against not only Syrian and Russian warplanes, but also Western civilian passenger jets. In the past, weapons funneled to so-called CIA-vetted “moderates” have quickly fallen into the hands of the Al Nusra Front, Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate. Now it appears that such concerns have been cast aside and the missiles have been supplied directly to forces tied to Al Qaeda.

The introduction of these weapons into the conflict in

Syria in flagrant violation of international law is indicative of the growing desperation within US ruling circles over the debacle confronting its regime-change operation. Syrian government forces have made increasing inroads in the past few days in eastern Aleppo, the last stronghold of the US-backed Islamists, taking back at least a third of the area previously occupied by these forces.

The mounting hysteria found consummate expression in a speech delivered Monday at the United Nations by US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, the administration’s foremost standard-bearer of “human rights” imperialism. Power read out the names of a dozen Syrian military commanders alleged to have attacked civilians or overseen torture in Syrian jails, warning, “Those behind such attacks must know that we in the international community are watching their actions, documenting their abuses and one day they will be held accountable.”

Power made no mention of war crimes committed by the US-backed “rebels,” which are also under investigation by the International Criminal Court, nor of the recent report that the global court is investigating over a decade of torture carried out by the US military and the CIA in Afghanistan and at so-called “black sites” around the world. One could easily come up with a list of a dozen US commanders who carried out attacks leading to the mass murder of civilians, from the brutal sieges of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004 through to the assault on the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan just a year ago.

Even as Power was speaking, a report filtered out of Syria that US warplanes struck a cotton mill in the village of Salhiyeh in the northeastern part of the country, killing 10 civilians, including children. Among the dead were three workers at the mill, a family of six who had taken shelter there after fleeing from a US-backed offensive in the area, and a bystander. Independent estimates place the number of civilians killed by US air strikes in the country at well over 1,000.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact