

White House threatens more strikes on Syria

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The Trump White House ratcheted up global tensions further on Monday with a threat to carry out new air strikes against Syria, expanding on its attack last Thursday in which the US fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles on a government airbase, killing 14 people, most of them civilians.

“The sight of people being gassed and blown away by barrel bombs ensures that if we see this kind of action again, we hold open the possibility of future action,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer stated at a press conference Monday.

The statement, invoking “barrel bombs,” the fairly crude explosive devices employed by the Syrian military, raised the prospect that the Pentagon could seize on any military action by Syrian troops against the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist “rebels” as a pretext for further direct US military intervention.

The White House spokesman subsequently told the media that his statement did not signal a change in policy, but did so in a manner implying that President Trump could launch military action as he saw fit. “The president retains the option to act in Syria against the Assad regime whenever it is in the national interest, as was determined following that government’s use of chemical weapons against its own citizens,” he said.

Previously, Trump and others had issued statements suggesting that last Thursday’s attack had been justified by Syria’s alleged use of a chemical weapon against civilians in the Islamist-held town of Khan Sheikhoun. Both Syria and its main ally, Russia, have denied the use of such a weapon.

Washington has presented no evidence to support its charge, much less any rational motive for the Assad government to carry out such an attack. The alleged incident has all the earmarks of a provocation staged by the CIA and its Islamist proxies to provide the pretext for the first-ever direct US military attack on Syrian government forces.

The new threats from the White House, which follow similarly provocative statements by Washington’s ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, advocating regime change in Syria, came on the same day that Russia and Iran issued their own warning that any new act of US aggression would be met with retaliation in kind.

The statement came from the joint command center of the Russian and Iranian militaries, the two principal allies of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

“What America waged in an aggression on Syria is a crossing

of red lines,” it warned. “From now on we will respond with force to any aggressor or any breach of red lines from whoever it is, and America knows our ability to respond well.”

The warning from the Russian and Iranian military followed a somewhat milder statement from Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, declaring that the US air strike was “not permissible and violated international law,” constituting a “clear violation” of Syrian sovereignty. It called for an “objective” investigation of the alleged April 4 chemical weapons attack and warned that US actions could “create a division among the countries in fighting terrorism.”

Conflicting statements emanating from both Washington and Moscow have created an atmosphere of increasing uncertainty, under conditions where relations between the two major nuclear powers are more tense than at any time in over half a century.

In Washington, the Trump administration has yet to spell out a coherent policy in relation to Syria, while its actions appear to be increasingly guided by a group of generals who control virtually all the top national security positions within the administration.

For Russia’s part, there are no doubt divisions within the ruling elite. Sections of the capitalist oligarchy with ties to US and international capital are likely fearful of a confrontation, while elements within the military and more nationalist layers may be drawing the obvious conclusion that the promised rapprochement with the coming to power of Trump has proven a dead end and retreat in the face of US aggression will only invite its escalation.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met on Monday with his G7 counterparts in Lucca, Italy, at the opening of a two-day meeting of the body, which represents the major capitalist powers. The conflict in Syria emerged as the overriding issue.

Tillerson and the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Canada and the European Union were reportedly seeking to hammer out a joint position presenting Russia with an ultimatum to accept the Western demand for regime change in Damascus in advance of Tillerson’s meeting Wednesday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow. It is not clear whether Tillerson will also meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, who had earlier

accepted a US order that he cancel his own planned trip to Moscow so as not to upstage Tillerson, was among the most bellicose voices at the outset of the G7 meeting, declaring that the body had to “make it clear to Putin that the time to back Assad has gone,” and warning that Putin was “damaging Russia” by continuing to back the Syrian government.

Johnson suggested that the G7 could reach an agreement to impose the first-ever sanctions against Russia over its role in Syria. Punishing economic sanctions have already been put in place in response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea following the Western-orchestrated coup in Ukraine in 2014.

The British *Guardian* reported Monday, citing a “G7 source,” that “Tillerson plans to offer the Putin regime a bald choice, between cutting Bashar al-Assad loose and being rewarded with a thaw in relations with the West, or continuing to back him, and risking a Libyan-style outcome.” In 2011, the US and its NATO allies carried out a war for regime change in Libya involving massive bombardments and the use of Islamist “rebels” as proxy ground forces. The neo-colonial aggression ended with the toppling of the government and the lynch mob murder of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi.

On Tuesday, the G7 is set to meet with the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, the regional powers that, along with the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies, organized, armed and funded the Al Qaeda-linked militias that have been unleashed on Syria over the past six years.

On the eve of the G7 meeting, Tillerson participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at the village of Sant’Anna di Stazzema, where the Nazis carried out an infamous massacre in 1944. There, he appeared to invoke the “human rights” pretext for global US militarism that Trump had opposed during the 2016 election campaign. “We rededicate ourselves to holding to account any and all who commit crimes against innocents anywhere in the world,” Tillerson said.

Washington’s continuing slaughter of civilians in its military operations in both Iraq and Syria and its support for the near-genocidal war being waged by Saudi Arabia and its allies against the people of Yemen expose the utter hypocrisy of this statement. Men, women and children continue to die—with virtually no reports in the Western media—in the US-backed siege of Mosul, where a single American air strike killed 300 people last month.

Over the weekend, a US warplane bombed a boat ferrying 40 civilians attempting to escape fighting near the ISIS-held Syrian city of Raqqa. The bodies of a woman and her six children were recovered. Others are still missing. In a separate attack, the US-led coalition killed 14 civilians, including children, in the northern ISIS-held village of Hneida.

Statements of support for Trump’s attack on Syria continue to be made by leading Democrats and former members of the Obama administration most associated with “human rights” imperialism. Typical was the response of Anne-Marie

Slaughter, the former director of policy planning at the State Department. She tweeted: “Donald Trump has done the right thing on Syria. Finally!! After years of useless handwringing in the face of hideous atrocities.”

The bellicose mindset prevailing within both US capitalist parties was exposed Monday in the ferocious reaction to one Democratic member of Congress who dared to question the official story about the Syrian chemical weapons attack and issue a warning over the immense danger posed by the escalating US-Russian conflict.

Howard Dean, the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, demanded the ouster from Congress of Representative Tulsi Gabbard after the Hawaii Democrat questioned whether the Assad government was behind the chemical weapons incident and revealed that the Trump administration had presented no evidence to Congress to support this claim.

Gabbard, an Iraq war veteran who came under fire after meeting with Assad during a trip to the Middle East, warned about the potentially catastrophic consequences of the US escalation in Syria. “What we’re talking about here really is the very high potential for a direct military conflict between the United States and Russia, the two world’s nuclear powers, risking, therefore, whether intentional or unintentional, nuclear consequences,” she warned.

“This is a disgrace, Gabbard should not be in Congress,” Dean responded, taking to Twitter to demand that Hawaii Democrats throw her out in 2018.

The danger of escalating tensions spinning out of control and producing a direct conflict between the US and Russia is continuing to mount. The US military command in Syria acknowledged Monday that the pace of its air strikes had slackened since Friday’s attack on the Syrian government airbase because of beefed-up “defensive” measures to protect the approximately 1,000 US troops on the ground in Syria. This means that US warplanes are being deployed to respond to potential attack by either Syrian or Russian fighters.

Moscow, for its part, has sent a warship armed with cruise missiles to join the Russian battle group sailing off the coast of Syria, enabling it to retaliate against another US attack.



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