

Russia and Iran issue warning against further US attack on Syria

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Responding to the Trump administration's unilateral and illegal missile strike on Syria April 7, Russia, Iran and Syria issued a blunt warning to Washington against conducting any further attacks Friday.

Meeting in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Iranian and Syrian counterparts issued a strongly-worded statement describing the strike as a "flagrant violation" of international law. Further action, it continued, would produce "grave consequences not only for regional but global security."

As if to underscore the point, the statement came less than 24 hours after the US confirmed it had dropped its largest non-nuclear bomb in Afghanistan in what amounted to a demonstration of Washington's determination not to be bound by any restrictions in its ruthless pursuit of its global economic and geopolitical dominance.

The horrific weapon was aimed principally at Russia and Iran, and any other power contemplating a challenge to Washington. It followed the trip by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Moscow, where five hours of talks between him, Lavrov and Russian President Vladimir Putin proved incapable of bridging the sharp tensions between the two countries. Tillerson effectively delivered a US ultimatum, demanding that Russia cease its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and emphasized the US commitment to regime change in Damascus. The secretary of state remarked afterwards that US-Russian relations were at a "low point," while Trump, hosting NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington, acknowledged that Washington and Moscow were not getting along.

Although the US military claimed that the MOAB had killed a total of 36 ISIS militants, all indications point to a much higher death toll. A resident in a village roughly 1.5 miles from the blast site told the *Guardian* the windows and doors in his home had been destroyed and there were

cracks in the walls. A local police chief added that it remained unclear how many had been killed by the bomb and by US aircraft, which strafed the area with gunfire Friday morning. The *New York Times* reported that four houses in the Pekhe area, three miles from the blast site, had been completely destroyed.

Even former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who served as a stooge for US imperialism following the 2001 invasion, denounced the bombing as a "brutal misuse of our country" which was being used as a "testing ground for new and dangerous weapons."

The joint Russian, Iranian and Syrian statement also condemned an initial investigation into the alleged gas attack in Khan Cheikhoun, which bore all the hallmarks of a CIA provocation and was used as the pretext to justify the missile strike.

Lavrov called for the expansion of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) team to include experts from all geographical areas, rather than the Western-dominated body that currently exists. "If our U.S. colleagues and some European nations believe that their version is right, they have no reason to fear the creation of such an independent group," Lavrov added. "The investigation into this high-profile incident must be transparent and leave no doubt that someone is trying to hide something."

In fact, it is already clear that the US and its imperialist allies are determined to avoid such an inquiry. No evidence has yet been presented to back up the charge that the Assad government conducted a chemical weapons attack. Russia has countered by saying that the incident was caused when an air strike struck a rebel weapons store, a suggestion dismissed out of hand by the corporate media even though the ability of the Islamists to produce and use chemical weapons has been well documented.

On Thursday, Russian officials suggested that an agreement had been struck with Washington not to launch

any further unilateral military actions in Syria, but no information to this effect has been forthcoming from the US. On the contrary, White House officials have this week repeatedly refused to rule out further air strikes.

The desperate efforts of the Kremlin to arrive at a compromise with US imperialism have been severely undermined over the past week. Initial hopes that the Trump administration would bring about an accommodation with Moscow have been dashed after the military-intelligence establishment, backed up by an hysterical anti-Russia media campaign, prevailed on the administration to maintain the aggressive anti-Russian stance developed under the Obama administration.

On Wednesday, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution tabled by Britain, France and the US which blamed Assad for the chemical weapons attack. The Syrian president once again rejected this charge Thursday, saying that it was a 100 percent fabrication.

Moscow and Teheran are Assad's closest allies and have assisted the Syrian government by sending military forces to the country in response to the strengthening of Islamist forces such as the al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaida, by the United States and its Western and Gulf allies. Their warning of "grave consequences" is therefore no empty threat.

Warplanes from the US-led coalition are continuing to launch bombing raids over Syria and the prospect of a direct clash between US and Russian aircraft is heightened even further by the suspension by Russia of cooperation with Washington on air traffic in retaliation for the April 7 cruise missile strike. Since Trump took office, he has loosened restrictions on the military so that air strikes can be ordered more swiftly, a move which has seen a dramatic rise in civilian casualties in both Syria and Iraq.

Russia's warning notwithstanding, all indications suggest that the Trump administration is preparing for a vast escalation of the Syria conflict to prevent the routing of its proxy forces.

According to a report by *Bloomberg*, a debate is ongoing within Trump's National Security Council about sending ground troops into Syria. While Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis and Stephen Bannon, Trump's top political adviser, reportedly reject the plan, it is endorsed by National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, whose position on the NSC was strengthened last month following Bannon's removal.

Retired four-star General Jack Keane, a close ally of McMaster, and other sources familiar with the debate

suggested to *Bloomberg* that the talk was of anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000 troops being deployed.

Keane told *Bloomberg* that the policy of relying on the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) was increasingly being seen as unviable. "Our special operations guys believe rightfully so that this was a proven force that could fight. While this makes sense tactically, it doesn't make sense strategically. Those are Arab lands, and the Arabs are not going to put up with Syrian Kurds retaking Arab lands."

The expansion of the US intervention would inevitably bring further death and destruction to the Syrian population, close to half a million of whom have already lost their lives during the six-year US-orchestrated war for regime change in Damascus. Millions more have been forced from their homes by the conflict.

On Wednesday, a US air strike killed 18 Kurdish fighters in a "friendly fire" incident in northern Syria. The pro-government news network SANA also accused US planes of bombarding an ISIS weapons depot near Deir ez-Zor resulting in the deaths of "hundreds" due to the release of toxic substances. However, this allegation has not yet been corroborated by other sources, including Russia, which said it had no information on the incident.

The Syrian government and rebel forces began the implementation of a forced resettlement program Friday for the residents of four towns, two in Idlib province and two close to Damascus. The agreement will see the predominantly Shia Muslim populations of Fouaa and Kefraya removed from their homes and sent to Aleppo province, while rebel fighters and residents in Zabadani and Madaya will go to Idlib.

The move is a further step in the dividing of the country along ethnic lines. While Assad's support base is predominantly among Shia Muslims, the Jihadi opposition groups have found their strongest backing among Sunnis.



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