

As Talks Open in Geneva, US Begins Direct Arming of Syrian Militias

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As US and Russian negotiators arrived in Geneva yesterday for talks ostensibly aimed at forestalling war against Syria, US officials announced that they were beginning to directly arm and supply the Islamist opposition inside Syria.

Over the last two years, the CIA has overseen the arming of the opposition militias with weapons paid for by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms like Qatar and transferred clandestinely via a network of bases in Turkey, Eastern Europe, and the Arab countries. Now, however, US taxpayer funds will go to arming opposition fighters allied or directly affiliated to Al Qaeda.

According to initial estimates by US officials, Washington will spend \$250 million overall on aid to these forces. The CIA is delivering various light weapons and ammunition, though opposition spokesmen criticized the weapons shipments as “symbolic,” demanding that the US provide them anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles.

The US State Department is also providing vehicles, sophisticated communications equipment, and advanced medical kits.

Washington’s arming of the so-called rebels shows that its shift to holding talks with Russia over Syria was carried out in bad faith. The Obama administration agreed to Moscow’s offer to discuss destroying Syrian chemical weapons this week, as it became clear that the US Congress would likely vote down a resolution authorizing a Syrian war opposed by the overwhelming majority of the American people. However, this tactical maneuver did not signify any fundamental shift in the US war drive.

Rather, the US government and its allies are responding to the crisis provoked by the deep opposition of the US and international working class to their war plans by intensifying their criminal intervention. They are stepping up their arming of the Islamists, while continuing to prepare for a direct military intervention in Syria—launched illegally without UN approval.

Based on lies that Assad gassed civilians in Ghouta last month, US officials are demanding an accelerated timetable for the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons. They are also signaling that, if this unspecified but short-term timetable is not followed, the United States will attack.

At a press conference yesterday evening in Geneva, US Secretary of State John Kerry stressed that Washington was still threatening war. Kerry said, “President Obama has made clear that should diplomacy fail, force might be necessary to deter and degrade Assad’s capacity to deliver these weapons.”

In fact, the US and European intervention is aimed not at chemical weapons, but at toppling Assad, as part of a broader strategy for dominating the Middle East. By destroying Assad's regime, Washington would isolate its ally Iran, US imperialism's main regional rival in the Middle East. Washington is therefore backing and arming sectarian Sunni Islamist militias that it sees as the most reliable anti-Iranian forces in Syria.

The Syrian opposition dismissed the chemical weapons issue and denounced any attempted negotiations. "We announce our definitive rejection of the Russian initiative to place chemical weapons under international custody," said Salim Idriss, the leader of the Syrian opposition's Supreme Military Council.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the opposition forces "feared they had lost their best chance of promptly ousting President Bashar al-Assad." They apparently were forced to shelve plans for a ground offensive on the Syrian capital, Damascus, which they hoped to carry out under cover of US and French air strikes against the Syrian army.

The criminality of the US policy is all the more brazen, in that the Islamist brigades Washington is promoting are either directly affiliated to Al Qaeda—like the Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—or, like the Ahrar al-Sham brigade, in close alliance with it. The US government last December formally declared Al Nusra a terrorist group responsible for hundreds of bombings in Syria.

Washington is nonetheless trying to help such forces rule portions of northern Syria, where Sunni militias such as Al Nusra operate death squads and carry out sectarian killings. US officials are setting up local government councils and basic services in opposition-held areas.

"We feel we're able to get these local councils off to a good start. We vet individuals who are getting our assistance to make sure they are not affiliated with terror organizations," said State Department official Mark Ward. Ward, who worked for the US Agency for International Development in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan, coordinates US "nonlethal" aid to the opposition from southern Turkey.

In fact, US officials made clear that they will also give aid to areas controlled by Al Nusra, though they absurdly present this as part of a US policy of competing for the "hearts and minds" of Syrian civilians in Islamist-held areas.

"If you see new fire trucks and ambulances in places where Al Nusra is trying to win hearts and minds, this might not be a coincidence," a US official told the *Washington Post*, which described this as a "sensitive strategy."

US imperialism's promotion of the Sunni Islamist opposition in Syria and the Middle East poses immense dangers. The alternatives that are starkly posed are a political mobilization of mass anti-war sentiment in the working class against the ruling class, or escalating conflicts that could provoke a broad war not only in the Middle East, but with Syria's leading ally, Russia.

The *New York Times* Thursday published an opinion piece written by Russian President Vladimir Putin, titled "A Plea for Caution from Russia." He warned that the US war drive against Syria, by throwing "the entire system of international law and order out of balance," threatens to undermine the authority of the United Nations.

Praising the alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States against Nazi Germany during World War II, Putin wrote: “The universal international organization—the United Nations—was then established to prevent such devastation from ever happening again ... No one wants the United Nations to suffer the fate of the League of Nations, which collapsed [before World War II] because it lacked real leverage. This is possible if influential countries bypass the United Nations and take military action without Security Council authorization.”

Alluding to the disastrous results of US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya Putin said: “Force has proved ineffective and pointless.”

Criticizing Obama’s justification of American foreign policy with the claim that the United States is an exceptional country, Putin wrote: “It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

Putin’s apparent allusion to the American Declaration of Independence in his appeal for the US to abandon its war drive incensed US lawmakers. Senator Nancy Pelosi denounced Putin’s remarks, saying: “I totally disagree. America is an exceptional country.”

Democratic Senator Robert Menendez said he “wanted to vomit” when he read Putin’s column. “Someone who came up through the KGB tells us what’s in our national interest and what is not,” he said.

Meanwhile, several Russian warships are steaming towards the eastern Mediterranean. While Russian officials have stated that this deployment is preparing for an evacuation of Russian citizens from Syria, it has produced a tense standoff with NATO warships, which are preparing to launch missile strikes against Syria.

The destroyer *Smetlivy*, the amphibious assault ship *Nikolai Filchenkov*, and the heavy guided missile cruiser *Moskva* are all expected to reach the area in coming days.

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