

Syria Escalation poses Growing Risk of Regional War

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

Global Research, May 29, 2013

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In the wake of the European Union's vote late Monday to lift a ban on directly arming Western-backed "rebels," there is a mounting danger of wider war. Growing military tensions in the region are likewise threatening to turn a Syrian peace conference, ostensibly backed by both Washington and Moscow, into a dead letter. Dubbed "Geneva II," the conference is tentatively set to convene in mid-June.

On Tuesday, the Russian government condemned the EU for "throwing fuel on the fire" of Syria's sectarian civil war and announced that it is going ahead with the delivery of S-300 air defense systems to Syria.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told a press conference in Moscow that the deployment of the advanced air defense batteries would serve as a "stabilizing factor" in the Syrian crisis by dissuading Western powers from launching direct military intervention.

The mobile, surface-to-air missile systems have been compared to the US Patriot and are capable of bringing down rockets as well as planes.

"We consider that such steps will restrain some hotheads from the possibility of giving this conflict, or from considering a scenario that would give this conflict, an international character with the participation of external forces," he said.

While the deployment of the missiles would complicate any imposition of a "no-fly zone," the action that began the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, it is also directed against Israel, which has repeatedly carried out air strikes against Syria in the course of the two-year-old crisis. The latest of three known air strikes took place earlier this month and provoked an angry denunciation from Moscow, which is Syria's long-standing ally and biggest arms supplier.

The Israeli government condemned the decision to deliver the Russian missile systems to Syria, claiming that the anti-aircraft batteries were not defense weapons, as Moscow has claimed, but rather "offensive" because their range made them capable of bringing down planes flying in Israeli airspace. Israeli officials also claimed that the weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite mass political movement and militia, which has resisted Israeli incursions into Lebanon.

Tel Aviv's principal concern is that the missile systems could rob the Israeli military of its ability to carry out military aggression against Syria as well as Lebanon with impunity.

Israel's Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon threatened that the country's military "will know what to do" if the missile systems reach Syria, an implicit threat of renewed air strikes that

could draw Russia more directly into the conflict.

Meanwhile, the White House acknowledged Tuesday that it had been informed in advance of a provocative stunt staged by Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican and former opponent of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential race, who made a brief foray just inside Syria's border with Turkey to meet with the so-called rebels Monday.

The area that McCain visited is largely under the control of Islamist militias, including the Al Nusra Front, which has formally aligned itself with Al Qaeda. His host, the former Syrian general and defector Salem Idris, is the leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army. While it is by no means clear that Idris exerts any real control over the various militias and gangs that have taken up arms against the government, the ex-general used McCain's visit to press Washington for more arms and direct military intervention.

"We need American help to have change on the ground; we are now in a very critical situation," Idris told the *Daily Beast*, which first reported McCain's two-hour trip to Syria. "What we want from the US government is to take the decision to support the Syrian revolution with weapons and ammunition, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft weapons," the ex-general continued. "Of course we want a no-fly zone and we ask for strategic strikes against Hezbollah both inside Lebanon and inside Syria."

The "rebels" demand for US imperialist intervention in both Syria and Lebanon apparently dovetails with preparations being made by the Pentagon and the Obama administration. The White House has asked the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to draft plans for the imposition of a no-fly zone to be enforced by Washington and its key NATO allies, the former Middle East colonial powers, Britain and France.

The *Daily Beast* quoted two unnamed administration officials Tuesday as saying that the request came "shortly before Secretary of State John Kerry toured the Middle East last week to try and finalize plans for an early June conference between the Syrian regime and rebel leaders in Geneva."

"The White House is still in contemplation mode but the planning is moving forward and it's more advanced than it's ever been," one of the administration officials said.

The online publication reported that the White House had requested that US agencies consider a shift in policy toward directly arming the anti-Assad militias and recognizing the "rebels" as Syria's legitimate government. It also noted that upcoming "Eager Lion" military exercises bringing 15,000 US and NATO troops, along with those of other US-aligned countries, to Jordan would provide the means of pre-positioning US military hardware for a Syrian intervention.

These preparations give the lie to the pretense that Secretary of State John Kerry is working with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, to ensure a successful peace conference next month in Geneva.

While the Syrian regime has indicated its willingness to attend a meeting aimed at reaching a political settlement of the two-year-old war, there is no indication that the "rebels" are prepared to do likewise, nor for that matter that they have any coherent leadership capable of negotiating such an agreement.

The Syrian National Coalition, the rebel front backed by Washington, has spent the last five days holding a fractious conference in Istanbul. Attempts by the Western powers to lend the body a more acceptable veneer by incorporating a handful of secular opponents of the Assad regime have been repeatedly rejected by the opposition's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated leadership.

While the Obama administration and its allies are prepared to recognize the coalition as the "legitimate representative" of the Syrian people and even the country's provisional government, it has become increasingly obvious that it has no significant popular support.

As the Abu Dhabi daily the *National* noted recently, the coalition's secretary general, Saudi Arabian-based businessman Mustafa Al Sabbagh, was given his post after appearing at the group's founding in Doha last November with 16 people he claimed were representatives of regional councils from across Syria.

"In fact many of them were his employees in Saudi Arabia, or his relatives," the paper reported.

The crisis of the so-called rebels and the reversals the Islamist militias have suffered recently in combat with the Syrian army have only served to escalate the US and Western European preparations for direct intervention. Washington and its allies are determined to pursue their war for regime change as part of a broader strategy for redrawing the map of the entire region to serve their own predatory interests.

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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