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After failed Geneva talks, US steps up threats against Syria

By Bill Van Auken

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In the wake of last week’s failed talks in Geneva, Washington and its allies are escalating pressure on Syria over chemical weapons and professed “humanitarian” concerns.

The shift toward a more aggressive posture toward the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad only underscores the fact that the Western powers remain committed to an agenda of regime change, whether by means of United Nations-brokered talks or outright military aggression.

UN envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi was compelled to admit last Friday, after the final round of talks, “We haven’t made any progress to speak of.”

The reason for the collapse of the negotiations was clear. The talks began with a ceremonial session in which US Secretary of State issued an ultimatum that the Syrian regime had to accept the removal from power of President Bashar al-Assad and the installation of a puppet of Washington’s choosing. Throughout the rest of the talks, the Western-backed “rebels” of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) followed Washington’s script, insisting on the ouster of Assad

as a pre-condition for any agreements, while the negotiators of the Syrian regime insisted on a common declaration calling for an end to violence and terrorism.

The negotiations only underscored that the SNC, composed of exile politicians, represents no one outside of the US State Department and various Western intelligence agencies. In discussions on prisoner exchanges, it insisted it could not speak for the Islamist-dominated militias that have abducted civilians, while on the issue of humanitarian aid to Homs, it allowed that it had no influence over the armed factions fighting government troops there.

On the ground in Syria, the major “rebel” forces are divided between those led by the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and another coalition of Islamist militias led by the al-Nusra Front, an opposing faction that also swears allegiance to Al Qaeda. All of them opposed the Geneva talks and threatened deadly reprisals against anyone who attended.

In the final days of the talks, Washington staged a deliberate provocation by revealing that it has resumed arms shipments to the “rebels,” and that the US Congress recently approved secret legislation providing aid and funding for the anti-regime forces through September. This aid supplements the billions of dollars’ worth of arms and funding being funneled into Islamist militias by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, with the CIA’s collaboration.

Much of the maneuvering by the SNC and its Western backers has appeared to be aimed at securing Russia’s support for a “transition” that includes Assad’s removal from power. Both Moscow and Washington are agreed that regime change should maintain the basic institutions—most critically the security forces—intact. Russia, however, fears that the imposition of a US-backed regime in Damascus will undermine its strategic interests throughout the region.

Following the collapse of the Geneva negotiations, Washington has engaged in renewed saber-rattling against Syria, particularly over the chemical weapons disarmament agreement reached last September. This deal, brokered by Moscow, provided the means for the Obama administration to back down from its threat to launch direct military strikes on Syria, an intervention that failed to garner the support of the Congress and even the closest US ally, Britain, and which was overwhelmingly opposed by the American people.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the implementing body of the international chemical weapons treaty, which is supervising Syria’s disarmament, issued a statement Friday acknowledging that the shipment of two consignments of deadly chemicals out of Syria represented “a start” of the process, but added that the need “to pick up the pace is obvious.”

The US delegate to the OPCW, Robert Mikulak, claimed that the disarmament effort had “languished and stalled” resulting in only 4 percent of Syria’s total arsenal of 530 metric tons of poison gas being shipped out.

Damascus has said that it is working on the OPCW timetable, but that it has faced challenges moving the poison gas under threat of attack by the Western-backed Islamists as well as difficult weather conditions. The deal providing for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons set a timetable that was unprecedentedly short, even for countries not in a state of civil war.

The Syrian government also has insisted that the international agency is satisfied with its cooperation, but that Washington is attempting to seize on delays as a pretext for aggression.

“We now know that the Assad regime is not moving as rapidly as it promised to move the chemical weapons out of Syria,” Kerry said on Friday.

He insisted that Security Council Resolution 2118, which instituted the chemical disarmament process, “makes it clear that if there are issues of non-compliance, they will be referred to the Security Council for Chapter 7 compliance purposes.”

Chapter 7 of the UN charter allows for military action to “restore international peace and security.” It was the invocation of Chapter 7 in relation to Libya that provided the legal fig leaf for the 2011 US-NATO war of aggression that toppled the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

Meanwhile, the US, Britain, other major NATO powers and Washington's allies among the Arab monarchies are reportedly preparing another UN resolution laying the groundwork for intervention on the grounds of humanitarianism.

The West and its Syrian puppets have indicted the Syrian regime for attempting to starve areas held by the Islamist militias into submission, including parts of the western city of Homs.

The plight of around 800 families besieged in the old city of Homs became an issue in the Geneva talks, with the West and its proxies in the SNC demanding the opening of “humanitarian corridors,” a ploy that was also used to prepare intervention in Libya. Syrian government negotiators countered with an offer to let all women and children out of the area, but this was rejected by the “rebels.”

Ignored in the West's “humanitarian” concerns is the far larger population—an estimated 45,000 people trapped in the predominantly Shia towns of Zahraa and Nubl outside Aleppo—which is on the brink of starvation after being placed under siege by the Islamist Sunni “rebels” for the past year and a half.

Among the worst starvation has taken place in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp on the southern outskirts of Damascus, which elements of the Al Qaeda-linked Islamists seized at the end of 2012 and turned into a free-fire zone. While most of the residents fled, some 18,000 people trapped there have undergone severe hunger, with dozens starving to death. Attempts to deliver humanitarian aid were repeatedly turned back both by the army's siege and by gunfire

from the US-backed armed opposition. The UN was able to deliver two shipments late last month.

UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos is set to convene a conference on Syria in Rome today, which will likely lay the groundwork for the Western powers to push for a resolution designed to further their campaign for regime change.