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US escalates Syrian intervention

By Bill Van Auken

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Having failed to advance regime-change in Syria through two rounds of talks in Geneva, the Obama administration is stepping up its funding and arming of Islamist and mercenary militias fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. And once again, Washington is turning toward direct military intervention.

In what marks a sharp escalation of the US-backed war for regime-change, the Saudi monarchy is shipping more sophisticated weaponry, including shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, to the so-called "rebels," while the US itself is paying salaries to an entire "rebel" front in southern Syria near the Jordanian border.

The offer of the new weapons came at a January 30 meeting in Amman, Jordan between "rebels" and agents of both US and Saudi intelligence, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Saturday, citing unnamed diplomats and "opposition figures."

"At the meeting, US and Gulf officials said they were disappointed with the Syrian government's refusal to discuss Mr. Assad's ouster at the talks and suggested a military push was needed to force a political solution to the three-year war," the *Journal* reported.

The aim is apparently to arm and organize an offensive to seize control of the southern suburbs of Damascus in order to subject the capital to military attack and force the ouster of Assad.

Previously, Washington voiced opposition to the provision of anti-aircraft missiles to the Islamist-dominated armed opposition in Syria out of concern that these weapons would end up in the hands of Al Qaeda-affiliated forces who could use them to attack US and other Western civilian passenger planes.

An unnamed US official told the *Journal,* "There hasn't been a change on our view" regarding the missiles. Such declarations provide the Obama administration with rather less than plausible deniability, given that, according the *Journal's* account, the promise to provide the Chinese-made portable missiles, known as Manpads, as well as anti-tank missiles, was made at the meeting between US and Saudi intelligence operatives and "rebel" leaders.

The same meeting was used to transfer US funds to pay salaries to what are effectively Western-controlled mercenaries fighting to bring down the Syrian regime. At least $3 million was paid out at the January 30 meeting and at another meeting held at the end of last year.

Jordan has been turned into a permanent base for this intervention. The *Journal* report describes a "military operations room" in Amman that is staffed by "officials from the 11 countries that form the Friends of Syria group, including the US, Saudi Arabia, France and the UK."

Obama flew to California Friday for confidential discussions with Jordan's King Abdullah II at Sunnylands, the former Annenberg Estate. He promised the Hashemite monarch $1 billion in loan guarantees as well as the renewal of a memorandum of understanding that provides the kingdom with $600 million in US financial and military aid. In return, Washington wants a free hand in using Jordanian soil as a launching pad for aggression against Syria.

US officials have acknowledged that the Obama administration has initiated intense discussions on a shift in its policy toward Syria. Last Friday, speaking in Beijing, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that Obama had "asked all of us to think about various options that may or may not exist."

On the same day, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters that the Defense Department had drawn up a range of plans for military intervention. "There's an interest in coming up with other options in Syria moving forward," he said, while declining to spell out what actions were under discussion.

After coming to the brink of a direct military assault on the country five months ago, invoking false claims that the Assad regime had carried out chemical weapons attacks on the civilian population, Obama backed down in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and the failure to win support from either the US Congress or Washington's closest ally, Britain. It accepted

Russia's proposal of a negotiated chemical disarmament of the Syrian regime, parallel to a deal on Iran's nuclear program and the organization of the Geneva talks between the US-backed Syrian opposition and Damascus.

The failure to advance the goal of regime-change via the Geneva negotiations—which broke down Saturday with no date set for their resumption—together with a noticeable deterioration in relations between Washington and Moscow, have led to a shift back toward an escalation of the US intervention in the war-torn country.

The administration and its supporters are advancing a series of mutually contradictory pretexts for this escalation. On the one hand, it has been ratcheting up a public campaign for intervention on the bogus grounds that US militarism is a force for "humanitarianism." The hunger, homelessness, death and destruction wrought by nearly three years of a war instigated by Washington and its allies are now invoked as justification for more of the same.

Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the United Nations, who made her reputation as an advocate of "humanitarian" imperialism before joining the administration, has been the point person for this propaganda ploy. Speaking at the UN last week, she invoked "images of emaciated and tortured Syrians, of dead and dying children, and of so much more" to argue for a Security Council resolution that would have "meaningful consequences on the ground," meaning a text that could be used to justify the use of military force under the guise of providing aid to the civilian population.

This pretext is based on the lie that only the Syrian government is fighting in the civil war, and that the massacres, sieges and other atrocities carried out by the US-backed forces simply have not occurred.

The particular utility of this pretext is its attraction for a pseudo-left layer that has been won to the cause of "humanitarian" imperialism over the past two decades, from the US-NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia to the US-NATO war in Libya and the current intervention in Syria. Speaking for this layer, Danny Postel, an academic and regular contributor to pseudo-left journals such as the *Nation* and *In These Times*, penned a *New York Times* op-ed piece together with Nader Hashemi entitled "Use Force to Save Starving Syrians."

Then there are the increasingly insistent claims that Washington must intervene because Syria is becoming a haven for Al Qaeda elements that could launch terror attacks on the US and other Western countries. The US provision of arms is being justified on the grounds that elements of the "rebels" have fought the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in an internecine conflict in the north of the country. The reality is that this conflict has pitted ISIS (which was expelled by Al Qaeda) against the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front and other Islamists. While Washington talks incessantly about arming "moderate" and "secular" forces, it can never provide the name or identity of any such force.

This case was made by former US national security advisor Samuel Berger, who argued in a *Washington Post* column: "The United States will not be able to defeat Al Qaeda in Syria by itself. To counter it, we must strengthen the relatively moderate elements among the opposition." In the same breath, he acknowledged that the military aid he is advocating "may be diverted to bad actors."

The third pretext was indicated by Obama himself, who suggested that stepped-up military operations against Syria were needed to promote peace. "There will," he said, "be some intermediate steps that we can take to exercise more pressure on the Assad government… to try to move forward on a diplomatic solution." This is patent nonsense. Washington ensured that the Geneva talks were never more than a charade, with its hand-picked "opposition," representing nothing more than the intelligence agencies that pay them, demanding that the Assad regime hand over the reins of power.

Behind all of these pretexts lies the drive by US imperialism to assert its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and weaken its rivals—Iran, Russia and China—by employing militarist threats and actions that pose the danger of a regional and even global conflagration.