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US steps up war against Syria after Obama's "peace" trip to Israel

By Johannes Stern

25 March 2013

After US President Barack Obama's trip to Israel last week the US and its allies are moving ahead with plans to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and install a pro-Western regime. CIA operations and calls to arm the Syrian opposition are escalating, amid a US diplomatic offensive in the Middle East to isolate Assad, and the collapse of a pro-Syrian government in Lebanon.

According to a *Wall Street Journal* report Saturday, the CIA is expanding its activities to support secular-leaning anti-Assad militias "with training in areas including weapons use, urban combat and countering spying by the regime." Unnamed US officials said that CIA support to rebel units represents an intensification of US efforts to strengthen the Syrian opposition.

On Friday Obama warned at a joint press conference with King Abdullah II of Jordan of the rising influence of extreme Islamist forces in Syria and announced a shift in US support to more secular forces.

"I am very concerned about Syria becoming an enclave for extremism because extremists thrive in chaos," Obama said. "They don't have much to offer when it comes to actually building

things, but they're very good about exploiting situations that are no longer functioning. They fill that gap.”

He said the US supported efforts to “begin the process of moving it in a better direction, and having a cohesive opposition is critical to that.”

Last year, the Obama administration had turned down a CIA-backed proposal to arm more secular opposition units. So far most of the arms shipments have gone to Islamist militias, who are carrying out the bulk of the fighting against Assad. Washington, which operates a CIA station near the Syrian-Turkish border, has long been involved in arming and strengthening the Islamist forces in close collaboration with its regional allies in Turkey and the Persian Gulf.

The announcement of more support to secular elements in the pro-Western Syrian opposition reflects increased efforts by the US and its allies to bring down Assad and install a pro-Western proxy regime in Syria. While the imperialist powers and their Western allies rely on extremist Islamist militias to bring down the Assad regime, they fear that forces such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, might prove unreliable in a post-Assad government.

Israel, US imperialism’s main ally in the Middle East, is in particular pressing for the strengthening of more secular elements in the opposition, as it fears the rising influence of armed Islamist terrorists in a neighboring country. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, a senior Israeli official involved in negotiations on Syria during Obama’s visit stated that “Israel would welcome America’s influence in shaping the post-Assad Syria.”

American-Israeli plans for a more directed military intervention in Syria are accompanied by a diplomatic offensive by both countries to forge a regional pro-war alliance to topple Assad and prepare for war against Iran.

In a move welcomed by the White House, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan and announced the restoration of normal diplomatic relations with Turkey. He apologized for the death of Turkish activists during an Israeli raid on the so-called Gaza flotilla in 2010. With Israel, Turkey is one of Washington’s main regional allies; it has repeatedly called for direct military intervention in Syria to bring down Assad.

On Sunday US Secretary of State John Kerry made an unannounced visit to Iraq to pressure Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to block flights from Iran to Syria. The US claims that Iran is sending weapons and fighters across Iraq to Syria to support Assad. Maliki’s Shiite government has said that inspections have shown that Iranian flights over its territory carry only humanitarian supplies.

As part of its increasingly aggressive offensive to replace Assad with a pro-imperialist stooge regime, the US is restructuring the Islamist-dominated Syrian National Coalition (SNC), the

main front of the pro-Western opposition cobbled together under the auspices of the US State Department last November. At a meeting last week the SNC nominated Ghassan Hitto, a US citizen and IT business executive, as the “prime minister” of a so-called “interim government.”

Over the weekend the previous leader of the SNC, Moaz al-Khatib, announced his resignation. A former Imam of the Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus, Khatib is an outspoken defender of Jabhat al-Nusra. When the US formally designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization, Khatib protested and urged Washington to reconsider the decision.

The promotion of more secular forces in the Syrian opposition goes hand in hand with continued collaboration with the Islamist militias, however. While Washington announces more cooperation directly with secular figures, it continues to tolerate and oversee huge arms shipments to Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist terrorist groups, which are largely supplied by Persian Gulf states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

On Thursday a suicide bombing in a mosque in the Syrian capital, Damascus, killed at least 49 people, including Sunni cleric Sheikh Mohammad Said Ramadan al-Buti. Syria’s minister for religious endowments, Mohammad Abdul-Satar al-Sayyed, blamed Western-backed terrorist forces for the attack.

The US-led offensive to bring down Assad is accompanied by renewed calls by France and Britain to directly arm the Syrian opposition. On Friday British Foreign Secretary William Hague and his French counterpart, Laurent Fabius, called for lifting the EU arms embargo against Syria ahead of a EU foreign ministers meeting in Dublin.

While concerns were raised about the Franco-British plans, the European states agree that the Syrian opposition has to be strengthened. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton described the situation in Syria and the region as “extraordinarily fragile,” announcing that the EU was continuing to discuss how to increase assistance to the “moderate Syrian opposition.” Some countries, such as Germany, Austria or Sweden, favor easing economic sanctions on areas held by the opposition instead of directly providing them with weapons.

The disagreements among the European powers about the scope of support for the Syrian opposition reflect increasing concerns about growing political instability in the entire region. On Friday, Najib Mikati announced his resignation as Lebanese Prime Minister. On Saturday the government stepped down, and Mikati called for a “national salvation” government to rule the deeply divided country.

The sectarian divisions ignited by the Western powers’ proxy war Syria are spilling over into Lebanon, a country which itself was engulfed in a fifteen-year civil war, from 1975 to 1990.

Mikati's decision came amidst heavy fighting between the Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen neighborhoods in Lebanon's second city, Tripoli, in which at least 12 people were killed. The Sunni-majority Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood supports the Western-backed, largely Sunni opposition in Syria. Jabal Mohsen is dominated by Lebanese Alawites—the Shiite sect from which Syrian president Assad hails—who sympathize with Hezbollah, the Shia political movement and militia in Lebanon allied with the Assad government and Iran.