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US Military Plans Direct Intervention in Syria

By Alex Lantier

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The Pentagon is planning a major escalation of the US-led war against Syria, involving direct US military involvement to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In a letter to Democratic Senator Carl Levin, the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. Martin Dempsey spelled out proposals and cost estimates for various potential US interventions in Syria. His plans include training opposition militias in Syria; missile strikes against Syrian targets; setting up a “no-fly zone” to ground or destroy Syria’s air force; seizing “buffer zones” of Syrian territory near Jordan or Turkey; and Special Forces raids to seize chemical weapons.

Pentagon plans include large-scale operations, costing at least tens of billions of dollars per year. Dempsey said Special Forces strikes would cost over \$1 billion a month, and missile strikes—requiring “hundreds of aircraft, ships, submarines, and other enablers”—would cost “in the billions.”

Dempsey’s letter followed a vote last week by the US House and Senate intelligence panels to directly arm opposition forces in Syria. Until now, they had been funded and armed by US-allied oil sheikdoms such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and not directly by the US. This allowed Washington to cynically claim the opposition was not on its payroll, even as the CIA coordinated the flow of arms and money.

The Obama administration lobbied intensively for the votes to arm the opposition in Syria. Vice President Joe Biden, CIA Director John Brennan, and Secretary of State John Kerry all called or briefed members of Congress.

The original justification for the Syrian war—that it was a humanitarian struggle to defend a democratic uprising of the Syrian people—is so nakedly exposed that the US and its European allies barely bother to repeat it. They recklessly armed Al Qaeda-linked forces like the Al Nusra Front and promoted a “moderate” stable of CIA assets and regime turncoats, hoping to topple Assad. While the Syrian people faced an onslaught of US-backed gangs and militias, the media and bourgeois “left” praised these forces as revolutionary fighters for democracy.

This criminal policy is now in shambles. This opposition faces defeat due to its lack of popular support and the international spread of the war. In recent months, select Iranian forces and fighters from the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah helped Assad turn the tide of battle against Sunni Islamist-dominated opposition militias.

Washington’s response is to prepare for an even greater bloodbath. Powerful sections of the ruling class are pushing for a broad US war to oust Assad and forcibly assert US imperialist hegemony over the Middle East. Anthony Cordesman, an influential strategist from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), made his case for such a war in a *Washington Post* column yesterday titled “Syria’s Ripple Effect.”

He wrote, “If Assad succeeds in crushing the opposition or otherwise maintains control over most of Syria, Iran will have a massive new degree of influence over Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in a polarized Middle East divided between Sunni and Shiite ... This would present serious risks for Israel, weaken Jordan and Turkey, and, most important, give Iran far more influence in the Persian Gulf, an area home to 48 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves.”

Cordesman outlined a spectrum of US actions, from providing anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles to the Western-backed militias to imposing a no-fly zone to permit direct US intervention: “US officials could make clear that either the rebels will succeed with such weapons—leading to a negotiated departure of Assad’s government and the installation of a new national government—or the United States will join with allies in creating a no-fly zone.”

Cordesman’s proposal amounts to a call for the Pentagon and its allies to prepare for broad regional or even global wars with mass casualties and devastating effects on the world economy. It could involve the US in a war not only with Syria, but also with Hezbollah forces and the Assad regime’s international backers—Iran, upon which the US imposed further sanctions last week, or even Russia and China.

Layers within the US military have cautioned against a rapid, all-out war, primarily because they are not sure that they are prepared for how such a war would escalate. Thus, in his letter to Levin, Dempsey reportedly wrote: “Once we take action, we should be prepared for what comes next. Deeper involvement is hard to avoid.”

Sections of the ruling class propose to strengthen the opposition and wage a long-term proxy war in Syria to carry out a neocolonial partition of the country. Citing White House Press Secretary Jay Carney’s comment that Assad “will never rule all of Syria again,” the *New York Times* wrote yesterday that Washington is preparing “the long-term reality of a divided Syria,” of which Assad would only control a “rump portion.”

All these plans to escalate imperialist intervention in the Middle East reflect the crisis and breakdown of American democracy. Ten years after the disastrous and unpopular US invasion of Iraq, imperialist strategists are formulating plans for another ruinous war, with contempt for the views of the population. Fully 61 percent of the population opposes US involvement in the Syrian war, according to a recent Quinnipiac poll.

The ruling elite's ability to press forward with plans for war underscores the deeply reactionary role of the media and the petty-bourgeois "left" in suppressing any overt expression of popular opposition. In particular, the role of pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US, Die Linke in Germany, or the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France is clear. They have worked continuously to market filthy imperialist wars to left-liberal sections of the middle class as "revolutions."

These parties have not only supported the wars in their publications, but also played a direct role in the intelligence operations necessary to organize the war. Early in the Syrian war, the NPA's Gilbert Achcar attended a covert October 2011 conference of the CIA-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) opposition group to advise it on the mechanics of foreign intervention.

These parties have functioned as mouthpieces for various sections of the intelligence community who favor an imperialist overthrow of Assad in alliance with the Islamist opposition.

Thus, a recent article by the NPA's main writer on Syria, Gayath Naïssé, titled "Self-organization in the Syrian people's revolution," praises the opposition militias that control the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, writing that "a democratic dream has been realized in Deir ez-Zor." He enthuses that "a free electoral process "was organized for the first time in forty years" as it was described by Khadr, a member of the local council of the opposition which was elected on Sunday by the inhabitants of the "liberated" areas."

This is a blatant falsification of the political record of far-right, Al Qaeda-linked militias that have seized various Syrian cities with US support, imposing a reign of terror on the population. In Deir ez-Zor itself, they operate death squads that have recorded widely-publicized videos of themselves murdering inhabitants opposed to their policies. More broadly, Islamist opposition militias have become notorious for looting areas that they control—most notably destroying factories in Aleppo, in order to fund their arms purchases from the United States' allies.

The ISO's latest statement on Syria—a piece by Michael Karadjis first posted on the Australian pseudo-left site *Links* —attacks any opposition to US intervention to back the Syrian opposition. Denouncing "lazy talk of the trickle of light weapons from abroad representing some great 'war on Syria,'" it attacks opponents of the US intervention as people "terribly frightened about the prospect of a trickle of arms reaching the rebels from the wrong people."

The statement adds, "It is not up to socialists within imperialist countries to demand our governments not provide arms just because we understand our government's aims are different to ours and such arming demands a political price from the rebels ... If the US or other imperialist states did decide for their own reasons to provide some arms, we should also *not* protest against it, robotic-style."

This passage underscores how the ISO functions as a conscious defender of imperialism and war. While acknowledging that the Syrian opposition consists of forces armed by the US government

and that therefore act as its stooges, it demands that these pro-US stooges in Syria be armed to the teeth, and that no opposition to such a proxy war be organized.

Such forces are accomplices in the devastation of Syria and ongoing preparations for even broader and bloodier imperialist wars.