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US Lays New Chemical Weapon Allegations Against Syria

By Peter Symonds
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US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday laid fresh allegations of chemical weapons use against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, thereby establishing another pretext for turning the imminent US air war in Syria against the regime in Damascus.

A year ago, the Obama administration exploited the now discredited claims that the Syrian military had carried out a gas attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, in order to prepare a devastating aerial assault on the country's armed forces, infrastructure and industry. While the attacks were called off at the last minute, the US has never relinquished its aim of regime-change and has seized on Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) atrocities to justify a new, illegal war of aggression.

Speaking in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Kerry renewed the claim that the Syrian military was using chemical weapons in the country's civil war. "We believe there is evidence of Assad's use of chlorine, which when you use it—despite it not being on the list—it is prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention," he said.

Last September, the Syrian government agreed to the destruction of its stockpiles of chemical weapons and the facilities used to manufacture and store them. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced last month that it had completed the task of supervising the destruction of the materials and facilities. Yet, at the time, Kerry continued to

press the issue, claiming that “much more work must be done” to deal with “discrepancies and omissions” in Syria’s chemical weapons’ declaration last year.

Now, as the US is about to launch air strikes on ISIS militias in Syria, Kerry has publicly revived the issue. Chlorine was never part of last year’s agreement because it is a basic chemical with many industrial applications. As such it also provides a convenient device for making further lurid allegations against the Assad regime.

Claims that the Syrian military used chlorine against opposition-held villages can be traced to an “independent investigation” carried out by the right-wing British newspaper, the *Telegraph*, in April. The *Telegraph*, which has links to the British military and intelligence establishment, passed on soil samples from the villages to the OPCW, which issued a report last week confirming strong traces of chlorine and ammonia. The UN body could not and did not, however, determine who used the gas.

Just as the US exploited the Ghouta gas attack last year as a casus belli for war on Syria, so Kerry used the latest chemical weapons claims to make clear that the US is still gunning for Assad. He declared that there was no “long-term future” for Assad in power, adding: “The Syrian opposition is not going to stop fighting Assad. We recognise that reality.”

Kerry’s comments underline the real purpose of Washington’s plans to train and arm at least 5,000 “moderate” Syrian opposition fighters. While nominally aimed against ISIS, these militias would form the core of armed forces to oust Assad and establish a pro-Western regime in Damascus. Yesterday the US Senate, following a vote in the House of Representatives on Wednesday, overwhelmingly approved—78 to 22—the Obama administration’s plan to build up anti-Assad forces in Syria.

US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel told the House Armed Services Committee that he and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Martin Dempsey had signed off on detailed plans for air strikes on ISIS targets inside Syria. Referring to the US Central Command, Hagel said: “CENTCOM’s plan includes targeted actions against ISIL [ISIS] safe havens in Syria, including its command and control, logistics capabilities and infrastructure.” He added: “Our actions will not be restrained by a border that exists in name only.” All that is now required is Obama’s approval.

According to a *SyriaDeeply* report this week, civilians in the Syrian city of Raqqa, currently held by ISIS, are already fleeing. Abu Ahmad, who left with his family, said: “We will not stay in our homes waiting for death to find us because of some targeting error.” A shop keeper inside Raqqa told the *Guardian*: “I believe most of the casualties will be civilian. The majority will be from Raqqa and very few from ISIS.”

The timing of the stepped-up war inside Iraq and air strikes in Syria is likely to be determined during next week’s UN General Assembly meeting. The *Australian Financial Review* reported today: “The final plans to wage war against Islamic State will be co-ordinated in private meetings between world leaders in New York... clearing the way for action to start.” Obama is due to address the General Assembly and chair a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Obama administration is still trying to consolidate its “coalition of the willing” to wage war in the Middle East. President Francois Hollande announced yesterday that France was prepared to carry out air strikes in Iraq, but not in Syria, citing concerns that extending the air war would strengthen the Assad regime. The British government has held off making detailed commitments until the results of the Scottish referendum are finalised.

Kerry declared on Wednesday that some Arab countries were committed to military action, saying: “We have significant levels of support to conduct military operations.” He did not name specific nations, however. Turkey has refused to allow US war planes to operate from its military bases but this week revived plans to establish a buffer zone along its border with Syria as a possible staging area for pro-Western, anti-Assad militias.

Obama has repeatedly declared that the US will not commit ground troops to combat in Iraq and Syria. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who has sent war planes and 600 military personnel to Iraq, including 150 SAS special forces, repeats the same mantra.

The worthlessness of such statements was underscored by an Australian “retired senior defence insider” who commented in yesterday’s *Sydney Morning Herald*: “You don’t send in the SAS to run seminars and give white-board presentations back at headquarters. These guys are our most highly trained killers, and that’s what they will be doing.”

The determination of the US and its allies to play down their involvement in a war in the Middle East stems from real fears of the emergence of anti-war opposition on a scale beyond that which erupted against the criminal US-led invasion on Iraq in 2003.