

Washington raises specter of Al Qaeda seizing Syrian chemical weapons

By Bill Van Auken
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Having first issued threats against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad over unspecified intelligence regarding its chemical weapons, the Obama administration is now warning that these arms may fall into the hands of the “rebels” which Washington itself has backed.

This is the significance of a front-page article published this week by the *Washington Post*, which reported that, “US officials are increasingly worried that Syria’s weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of Islamist extremists, rogue generals or other uncontrollable factions.”

According to the *Post*, citing unnamed US officials, members of the Islamist militia, al-Nusra, which Washington has formally designated as a “foreign terrorist organization” and charged is an offshoot of Al Qaeda, overran “the Sheik Suleiman military base near Aleppo, where research on chemical weapons had been conducted” and were “closing in on another base near Aleppo, known as Safirah, which has served as a major production center for such munitions.”

While a decade ago, Washington prepared its invasion of Iraq by propagating lies about the regime of Saddam Hussein collaborating with Al Qaeda and a supposed threat he would supply the terrorist organization with “weapons of mass destruction,” today the Obama administration is floating a new and perverse pretext for war. It is raising the specter that its war for regime change in Syria might place such weapons into the hands of the Al Qaeda-linked forces that the US itself has both armed and strengthened in the bid to oust Assad.

While Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other administration officials have spoken publicly about the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons against the insurgency in Syria being a “red line” that

would trigger US “consequences,” the administration has not made such pronouncements about its response to these weapons being appropriated by Al Qaeda-linked “rebels.”

Speaking to US military personnel at the giant American base at Incirlik in southern Turkey, about 60 miles from the Syrian border, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta spoke of the Pentagon’s preparations for intervention in Syria over the chemical weapons issue. “We have a number of options that we can deploy if we have to, when the president makes that decision, to be able to act,” said Panetta.

The Pentagon chief added: “I’m not going to go into specifics. But I can tell you that—you know, that the United States, when we decide we’re going to do something, we damned well are going to do it.”

According to the *Post* report, unnamed Pentagon officials said that US military officers have been “updating their contingency plans in recent weeks as chaos has overtaken Syria.” They said that Washington was “working closely with Israel, Jordan and NATO allies, including Turkey, to monitor dozens of sites where Syria is suspected of keeping chemical arms and to coordinate options to intervene if necessary.”

Leonard Spector, deputy director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute for International Studies told the *Post* that it would take 1,000 inspectors and specialists on the ground in Syria to “monitor the condition of each [chemical weapons] site and take inventory.”

The *Post* article adds, however: “That’s assuming there would be no need to provide security at the installations, much less engage hostile forces. In a worst case scenario, under which the Syrian military would gas its own people, the Pentagon has projected that it could take up to 75,000 troops to intervene.”

Meanwhile, the Assad regime has issued its own warnings. Insisting that it would never use chemical weapons against the Syrian population, it charges that the real threat comes from the “rebels” and their imperialist patron in Washington.

Syria’s ambassador to the United Nations in a letter to the Security Council and Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed concerns in Damascus that the US and its allies could supply the Islamist militias with chemical weapons and then accuse the Syrian government of using them to provide a pretext for direct intervention.

“We have repeatedly stated publicly and through diplomatic channels that Syria will not under any circumstances use any chemical weapons that it may have, because it is defending its people from terrorists backed by well-known states, at the forefront of which is the United States of America,” wrote Ambassador Bashar Ja’afari. The letter was dated December 8 but first made public on Monday.

“We are genuinely worried that certain states that support terrorism and terrorists could provide the armed terrorist groups with chemical weapons, and then claim they had been used by the Syrian Government,” Ja’afari continued.

In response to Washington’s threats of intervention over a supposed danger that the Syrian regime will employ the weapons against the country’s population, the ambassador wrote, “States such as the United States of America that have used chemical and similar weapons are in no position to launch such a campaign, particularly because, in 2003, they used the pretext of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction in order to justify their invasion and occupation.”

Last week, in conjunction with a “Friends of Syria” conference in Morocco, the Obama administration took the combined actions of recognizing the Syrian National Coalition—whose leadership had been cobbled together the previous month under the direction of the US State Department at a luxury hotel in Doha—and of placing the al Nusra front on its list of “foreign terrorist organizations.”

The incongruity of these two measures, one of which signals a policy of war for regime change until victory, while the other seeks to distance Washington from what is widely acknowledged as the leading fighting force in this war, has led to protests from among the

supposed “moderates” that the US publicly backs.

Among the latest to criticize Washington’s actions is Riad Seif, the wealthy exiled Syrian businessman who collaborated with the State Department in launching the initiative for the new Syrian opposition front. He disputed the terrorist designation, telling the French daily *Le Figaro*: “They do not hurt anyone. Generally, the Syrian Islamists are known for their moderation.”

Seif made this statement after a video placed on YouTube and reposted by the Syrian state news agency Sana had been widely viewed in Syria—though not even mentioned by the US corporate media. It depicts Sunni Islamist “rebels” physically abusing two captured Syrian Alawite officers (from the same sect as Assad) and then beheading them, with a boy appearing to be about 10 years old given a sword to take the first hack at one of their necks.

The video is emblematic of the bitter sectarian character of the civil war into which Syria has been plunged by US and Western intervention.

Washington’s feigned concern for the Syrian people in the face of an alleged threat from chemical weapons is a lie and a pretext. US imperialism is working in a de facto alliance with the most reactionary Islamist forces, including Al Qaeda, in a concerted attempt to lay waste to Syrian society, as part of a broader campaign to reorder the Middle East in its own interests.

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