

Pentagon chiefs reveal divisions over Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Testimony by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey last week revealed that sharp tactical differences had emerged within the Obama administration over what role US arms should play in prosecuting Washington's strategy for regime-change in Syria.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee February 7, Panetta and Dempsey were asked by Senator John McCain (Republican of Arizona) whether they had backed a proposal developed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then-CIA Director David Petraeus "that we provide weapons to the resistance in Syria."

Both answered in the affirmative, prompting McCain, who has long advocated a more direct US intervention in Syria's sectarian civil war, to charge that President Barack Obama had "overruled the senior leaders of his own national security team."

Both Panetta and Dempsey subsequently added that, in the end, they agreed with Obama's decision to reject the proposal.

The exchange came as a brief aside in a hearing called to probe the Pentagon's response to the attack on the US consulate and a secret CIA facility in Benghazi, Libya in September of last year. In the run-up to November's presidential election and since, Republicans have sought to turn the Benghazi incident, which claimed the lives of the US ambassador and three other Americans, into a major political issue. They have presented it as proof that the Obama administration is "soft on terrorism" and charged that the White House deliberately sought to mislead the public as to the nature of the assault.

It is significant that in all of the media coverage of the McCain-Panetta exchange and the commentary on the apparent split on Syria, there has been no examination of the direct relationship between the Benghazi incident and US policy on arming the Syrian "rebels." This is, in large part, because the Benghazi attack exposed the fraud of Washington's so-called "war on terror" against Al Qaeda and related forces.

The fatal attacks on the US facilities in Benghazi were carried out by Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militia elements, who, in their ideology and origins, are analogous to the main fighting forces backed and armed by Washington and its allies in the war to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The death of the four Americans was a case of "blowback" from the US-NATO war in Libya, in which Washington and its allies used air power and the arming and training of these same Islamist forces to bring down the government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Moreover, there is substantial reason to suspect that the secret CIA facility had a hand in the transfer of armaments from the Libyan port of Benghazi to Turkey, where another secret CIA operational headquarters was established to coordinate the supply of arms to Syrian opposition forces, principally paid for by Washington's allies in the region—the Sunni monarchies in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the Turkish government.

That the events in Benghazi would give pause to any administration plan to participate more directly in the arming of the anti-Assad militias in Syria is self-evident.

On Sunday, General Dempsey repeated that he had been in favor of arming the Syrian anti-regime forces, but asserted that this policy was never part of a specific plan. He said it was merely presented in a "menu of options."

"Conceptually, I thought if there were a way to resolve the military situation more quickly it would work to the benefit not only of the Syrian people, but also us," Dempsey told reporters accompanying him on a flight from Afghanistan, where he attended a change-of-command ceremony for NATO-led forces. He indicated his concern that Syria would evolve into a "failed state," and said the purpose of sending in US arms would be to hasten the fall of Assad, while allowing the preservation of Syria's state apparatus and security forces.

The problem, he suggested, was finding so-called "rebels" that the US could publicly back. "We still have a challenge identifying who among the opposition, if they

achieved a position of dominance, would commit themselves to the longer-term objectives of establishing a representative government, an end to violence, preservation of the institutions so that Syria doesn't become a failed state," he said.

While most advocates of a more direct US role in arming the Syrian opposition have called for Washington to aid "secular" and "democratic" rebels, none of them have ever named the forces they have in mind. The principal fighting force of the so-called Syrian "revolution" is organized around Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist formation tied to Al Qaeda whose ranks have been swelled by thousands of foreign jihadis who have been funneled into Syria. Al Nusra is the best armed and best funded of the militias.

Despite stating that Washington needed "a much clearer understanding of the environment in Syria" before escalating its current intervention, Dempsey added, "No one has taken any option off the table in any conversation in which I have been involved."

According to the *Washington Post*, a CIA "red team" concluded that the Syrian insurgents already possessed sufficient light weaponry and that more of it would not have "tipped the scales." It added that provision of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles was ruled out from the start.

"We wouldn't even consider it, because God forbid they would be used against an Israeli aircraft," one official told the *Post*. Israel's unchallenged control of the air is decisive in its ability to wage one-sided wars against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well to attack southern Lebanon.

This view was echoed last Friday by White House press spokesman Jay Carney. "We don't want any weapons to fall into the wrong hands," he said, "and potentially further endanger the Syrian people, our ally Israel or the United States."

Officially, Washington has provided \$355 million in "humanitarian aid and supplies." This so-called "non-lethal" assistance has included military communications equipment and intelligence that have facilitated military attacks by the "rebels."

In a statement Monday, Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, dismissed Washington's claim that it was involved solely in "non-lethal" aid. "The US is an extremely powerful state that enjoys enormous authority in such countries as Qatar, the chief arms supplier of the Syrian opposition," said Churkin. "If the US wants to remain consistent with its policy, it should restrain those

countries from providing Syrian rebels with deadly weapons."

The *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial Monday denouncing Obama for rejecting the proposal to more directly arm the Syrian "rebels." The newspaper stressed that the main purpose of a more direct US intervention is to strike at Iran.

"In overruling his advisers, Mr. Obama has prolonged Syria's civil war, increased regional instability, and delivered a strategic gift to Iran, the main enemy of Israel and the US," the editorial states.

There have been increasing calls for Washington to directly organize a "third force," opposed to the dominant Islamist factions, to serve as a proxy army to fight the Assad regime. "Putting US special forces on the ground with mainstream rebels in Syria, and giving them the weaponry and training to take a lead in the fighting, would help shorten the conflict, provide the US with eyes and intelligence, and ensure that Syrians don't see Al Qaeda radicals as the only people who came to help in their time of need," Bloomberg News commented.

Similarly, the *Washington Post*'s foreign affairs columnist, David Ignatius, wrote, "... the most effective step the United States could take would be to train hundreds of elite commando forces, which would be well-armed and have the strong command-and-control that has generally been lacking in the Free Syrian Army. These disciplined paramilitary forces, like groups the CIA has trained in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan, could shift the balance on the ground."

Evidently, while Washington appears content for the moment to fuel the sectarian civil war that is destroying Syria, plans for far more direct intervention are under active consideration.

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