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Obama, “Friends of Syria” Press for Military Intervention Against Damascus

By Alex Lantier

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US President Barack Obama and international diplomats gathered at the “Friends of Syria” meeting in Tunis issued statements yesterday pressing for military intervention in Syria. They cited as a pretext escalating warfare between US-backed Syrian “rebel” forces and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Obama spoke in Washington shortly after the end of the Tunis meeting, saying it was “imperative” to halt the fighting in Syria. “It is time to stop the killing of Syrian civilians by their own government,” he declared. He did not say, however, what action the US government was considering.

After the Tunis meeting, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denounced the February 4 veto by Russia and China of a UN Security Council resolution moved by the Arab League demanding that Assad step down. She said, “It is quite distressing to see two permanent members of the Security Council using their veto while people are being murdered—women, children, brave young men—houses are being destroyed. It is just despicable and I ask you whose side are they on? They are clearly not on the side of the Syrian people.”

Clinton’s pose of outrage is a contemptible ploy. Its aim is to seize upon reports of fighting between the army and “rebel” forces to justify what would be an even bloodier, US-led

intervention in Syria along the lines of last year's NATO war in Libya.

It is possible to advocate such a policy only by engaging in the most shameless lying. On the one hand, US officials claim to be considering only "humanitarian" assistance for the Syrian people, while on the other they fan the flames of war—militarily backing a right-wing, Islamist-led insurgency. Their goal is the colonial re-subjugation of Syria, either by direct military conquest or by fomenting a palace coup by members of the regime who fear the loss of Russian and Chinese support.

Syrian opposition spokesmen at the Tunis meeting told Reuters: "We are bringing in defensive and offensive weapons... It is coming from everywhere, including Western countries and it is not difficult to get anything through the borders."

Other diplomats speaking in Tunis also backed military intervention, choosing their words to avoid confirming that it had already begun. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal called sending weapons and ammunition to pro-US forces in Syria "an excellent idea." French and Qatari officials spoke in favor of sending forces into Syria to clear a path for "humanitarian corridors"—that is, conquering parts of Syria through which supplies can be sent to the "rebels."

US officials' statements made clear that, though they do not openly acknowledge it, they are supporting the Syrian "rebels" militarily. Speaking on Thursday in London, while meeting with British, French, German and Arab diplomats before the Tunis meeting, Clinton said Assad would face "increasingly capable opposition forces." She added, "They will come from somewhere, somehow find the means to defend themselves as well as begin offensive measures."

Such comments expose the utterly deceitful character of the position of the US and its allies. Its hands dripping with the blood of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans killed and wounded in counter-insurgency campaigns by US occupation forces, the US government is preparing a new war on the basis of hypocritical claims that it considers Assad's suppression of a foreign-backed insurgency to be intolerable. Responsibility for ongoing fighting in Syria lies primarily with the US and its allies.

The pose of "humanitarian" anguish by Clinton and her accomplices is but one more weapon in the US diplomatic arsenal, alongside sanctions, targeted assassinations, drone strikes and mass murder.

Yesterday, leading newspapers openly aired the plans being drawn up by imperialist diplomats and intelligence agencies for the conquest of Syria by the United States and its allies.

In a Financial Times comment, former CIA official Emile Nakhleh wrote: "The assistance should begin with establishing a haven for the opposition and the military personnel who defect from the regime, as in northern Iraq in 1991. Food, water, clothes, medical supplies and technical equipment should be dropped into the safety zone. Ankara [the Turkish government] would have to play a critical role in planning, and ultimately in maintaining and supplying the zone, as it would almost certainly have to be contiguous to Turkey. If Syrian forces violate the sanctuary, the West should arm the opposition and work with military defectors to organize more effective

resistance.”

Similar plans were laid out by former US State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter in the New York Times. Calling for the supplying of “anti-tank, counter-sniper, and portable anti-aircraft weapons” to the US-backed forces, she called for the establishment of “no-kill zones” in which US-backed Syrian forces could find sanctuary. Once Syrian government forces in these misnamed “no-kill zones” were “killed, captured or allowed to defect without reprisal, attention would turn to defending and expanding the no-kill zones.”

Such plans do not describe a “humanitarian” operation, but a US-led war of extermination against any Syrian forces that refuse to submit to the colonial-style subjugation of the country.

A substantial part of the Tunis meeting was devoted to trying to unify the disparate forces of the Syrian opposition into a viable proxy guerrilla force for US imperialism, similar to the National Transitional Council in the war in Libya. This has proven difficult amid deep tensions between three opposition factions: the National Coordination Committee (NCC), the Syrian National Council (SNC), and the Syrian Free Army (SFA), which largely consists of Syrian army defectors who fled to Turkey.

US officials have also reported ties between Al Qaeda and Islamist elements of the US-backed Syrian opposition. (See, “[International tensions mount over Syria conflict](#)”).

Negotiations with the “rebel” factions have highlighted the fact that none of the US proxies in Syria have mass popular support. The Financial Times itself complained that the Syrian opposition is “splintered along ethnic and social lines.”

The NCC, composed largely of Stalinist and Kurdish nationalist parties, did not attend the Tunis meeting, where diplomats declared the SNC—which is dominated by Islamist forces around the Muslim Brotherhood—to be a “legitimate interlocutor.”

The meeting declined to name the SNC a “representative of the Syrian uprising,” however, as some had initially proposed. This appears to reflect the hope that further negotiations can secure the NCC’s full participation in Washington’s plans. British officials told the press that they hoped to get the opposition to “set out a shared set of principles, with a strong message of inclusion to all ethnic groups in Syria.”

The character of the opposition highlights the politically criminal character of the imperialist intervention in Syria. Supposedly carried out to protect Syrian protesters, it is also presented as an extension of the revolutionary struggles that have swept the Middle East. In fact, US policy is a counterrevolutionary response to the working class struggles that overthrew US-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt last winter.

In Tunisia and Egypt, mass struggles of the working class spread throughout the country, weakening the loyalty of the armed forces to the regime and forcing the resignation of hated heads of state. Washington backed both Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt and worked feverishly to keep them in power.

In Syria, the US and its allies rapidly moved to turn regional protests, based in Sunni parts of the country and led by organizations with no mass base, into a right-wing insurgency with virtually no support in either of Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo. It is not a revolution, but a US-directed drive to oust a regime allied to Iran so as to further isolate that country and strengthen American hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East.