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On Eve of Syria "Peace Talks," Washington Threatens Escalation across Region

Par Bill Van Auken
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With Syria "peace talks" ostensibly set to begin in Geneva today, Washington has ratcheted up threats of US military escalation throughout the region. In the past few days, top US civilian and military officials have declared that they are prepared to seek a "military solution" in Syria, put "boots on the ground" in Iraq and launch another US-NATO war in Libya.

The talks themselves, which are being convened under the auspices of the United Nations, are not expected to begin as scheduled because of continuing sharp differences over what forces will be invited to attend and how the proposed agenda for a "political transition" will affect the future of Syrian President Bashir al-Assad.

The US and its regional allies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are insisting that the delegation representing the Syrian opposition be limited to a so-called High Negotiations Committee, an alliance dominated by Islamist militias that was formed under the auspices of the Saudi monarchy.

Russia has opposed the participation in the talks of Salafist militias linked to Al Qaeda, which Washington and its allies have attempted to pass off as "moderate rebels." It has also backed the participation of the Kurdish YPG militia that has seized substantial territory from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which all sides claim to be fighting.

Meanwhile, Turkey has indicated that it will boycott the talks if the Kurds are allowed to participate.

Underlying the bitter disputes over who will attend the so-called peace talks are the sharply divergent interests of the US, which, together with its regional allies, has backed the Islamist militias with arms and funding in a bid to topple the Assad government, and Russia, which counts this government as its principal ally in the Middle East. For its part, Turkey, while claiming to oppose ISIS, is principally concerned with overthrowing Assad and quelling the rise of a Kurdish territory on its southern border.

The Obama administration is determined to use the talks as an instrument for furthering its goal of regime change in Syria and, more broadly, the assertion of US imperialist hegemony throughout the Middle East. It insists that any political transition must include the speedy removal of Assad.

It faces being thwarted in these efforts, however, by Russia's military intervention. The

bombing campaign initiated by Moscow has begun to produce significant military gains by the Syrian army and allied militias against the Islamist forces backed by the US and its allies.

Backed by Russian airstrikes, Syrian government troops and local militias Sunday took back the strategic city of Rabia in western Latakia province, which had been under control of so-called "rebels," including the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, since 2012. The Syrian army has been making major gains as well in the north of Latakia, near the Turkish border, where Turkey staged its shoot-down of a Russian warplane. These advances threaten to cut off a principal supply route for the Western-backed Islamists.

The US has responded to the events in Syria with a flurry of visits to its closest regional allies and key sponsors of the Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria, along with a steady drumbeat of threats.

Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Riyadh over the weekend, barely three weeks after the Saudi monarchy sparked international outrage and revulsion with the mass beheadings of 47 prisoners, including Nimr al-Nimr, a Muslim cleric and leading spokesman for Saudi Arabia's oppressed Shiite minority. Uttering not a word of criticism of the savagely repressive and viciously sectarian absolute monarchy, Kerry declared that the US maintained "as solid a relationship, as clear an alliance and as strong a friendship with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as we have ever had."

Vice President Joseph Biden, meanwhile, visited Turkey where he solidarized himself with the brutal crackdown by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan against the country's Kurdish minority that has seen tanks firing on neighborhoods and has cost the lives of hundreds of civilians.

Biden declared that Washington and Ankara were engaged in a "shared mission on the extermination of" ISIS. In reality, the Turkish government has been one of the main pillars of support for ISIS and other Islamist militias. It has directed its fire principally at Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, the same forces that the US has employed as proxy ground troops in its air war.

Biden said that Washington was determined to press ahead with the talks in Geneva, adding, "But we are prepared if that is not possible to having a military solution to this operation."

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter indicated that the Pentagon is also preparing an escalation of its military intervention in Iraq, declaring at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland that the US is "looking for opportunities to do more, and there will be boots on the ground—I want to be clear about that—but it's a strategic question, whether you are enabling local forces to take the hold, rather than trying to substitute for them."

The Obama administration had repeatedly foresworn US "boots on the ground" in the region, referring to the deployment of large numbers of combat troops. Now it is deliberately employing the same phrase to justify the steady escalation of the deployment of "advisers" and "trainers" who are becoming ever more directly involved in combat operations.

At the same time, the US military is preparing to invoke the spread of ISIS as the pretext for

intervening for the second time in less than five years in Libya.

"It's fair to say that we're looking to take decisive military action against ISIL in conjunction with the political process" in Libya, Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Friday. "The president has made clear that we have the authority to use military force."

In other words, President Barack Obama, has, without a word of warning to the American people, handed the Pentagon brass authorization to launch "decisive military action," i.e., yet another war, whenever it sees fit.

The growth of ISIS in Libya, as in Iraq and Syria, is a direct product of US imperialist interventions in the region that have claimed over a million lives and turned millions more into refugees.

The US-NATO war in Libya toppled and murdered Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, smashed the country's governmental and social infrastructure, and triggered a protracted civil war between the various Islamist militias—including those now affiliated to ISIS—that the US used as proxy forces in the 2011 war.

These same Libyan Islamist elements were funneled, together with large Libyan arms stockpiles, into Syria to wage the US-orchestrated war for regime change in that country. Now many of them have returned, bringing with them thousands of so-called foreign fighters.

Another war by the US and the European powers in Libya will not be aimed at smashing ISIS, any more than the last one was directed at defending "human rights" and "democracy." Its principal objective will be the imposition of a puppet regime that will place the country's huge oil reserves firmly under Western control.

Behind this region-wide eruption of American militarism there exist sharp differences within the US ruling establishment and Washington's sprawling military-intelligence apparatus. The conflict is between those demanding a major new escalation in the Middle East and those opposing a large commitment of troops and materiel, insisting instead on a "pivot" to confront US imperialism's major strategic rivals, principally China and Russia.

In the end, however, American imperialism is driven by its crisis to attempt to assert its control over the entire planet, and the so-called war against ISIS in the Middle East and North Africa becomes indissolubly linked with the buildup toward war with Russia and China. The increasingly frenetic interventions in Syria, Iraq and Libya could provide the spark for a global conflagration.

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Articles Par : Bill Van Auken

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