

Statement on impending US, UK and French military intervention in Syria

We, members of the Global Network for Syria, are deeply alarmed by recent statements by Western governments and officials threatening the government of Syria with military intervention, and by media reports of actions taken by parties in Syria and by Western agencies in advance of such intervention.

In a joint statement issued on 21 August the governments of the US, the UK and France said that 'we reaffirm our shared resolve to preventing [sic] the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and for [sic] holding them accountable for any such use... As we have demonstrated, we will respond appropriately to any further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime'.

The three governments justify this threat with reference to 'reports of a military offensive by the Syrian regime against civilians and civilian infrastructure in Idlib'.

On 22 August, Mr John Bolton, US National Security Adviser, was reported by Bloomberg to have said that the US was prepared to respond with greater force than it has used in Syria before.

These threats need to be seen in the context of the following reports and considerations.

Reports have appeared of activity by the White Helmets group, or militants posing as White Helmets, consistent with an intention to stage a 'false flag' chemical incident in order to provoke Western intervention. These activities have reportedly included the transfer of eight canisters of chlorine to a village near Jisr Al Shughur, an area under the control of Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham, an affiliate of the terrorist group Al Nusra. Some reports refer to the involvement of British individuals and the Olive security company. Other reports indicate a build-up of US naval forces in the Gulf and of land forces in areas of Iraq adjoining the Syrian border.

We therefore urge the US, UK and French governments to consider the following points before embarking on any military intervention:

- In the cases of three of the previous incidents cited in the 21 August statement (Ltamenah, Khan Sheykhoun, Saraqib) OPCW inspectors were not able to secure from the militants who controlled these areas security guarantees to enable them to visit the sites, yet still based their findings on evidence provided by militants.
- In the case of Douma, also cited, the interim report of OPCW inspectors dated 6 July based on a visit to the site concluded that no evidence was found of the use of chemical weapons and that evidence for the use of chlorine as a weapon was inconclusive.
- Western governments themselves acknowledge that Idlib is controlled by radical Islamist extremists. The British government in its statement on 20 August justified its curtailment of aid programmes in Idlib on the grounds that conditions had become too difficult. Any action by the Syrian government would not be directed at harming civilians, but at removing these radical elements.
- Any military intervention without a mandate from the United Nations would be illegal.
- Any military intervention would risk confrontation with a nuclear armed co-member of the Security Council, as well as with the Islamic Republic of Iran, with consequent ramifications for regional as well as global security.
- There is no plan in place to contain chaos in the event of sudden government collapse in Syria, such as might occur in the contingency of command and control centres being targeted. Heavy military intervention could result in the recrudescence of terrorist groups, genocide against the Alawite, Christian, Druze, Ismaili, Shiite and Armenian communities, and a tsunami of refugees into neighbouring countries and Europe.

In the event of an incident involving the use of prohibited weapons – prior to taking any decision on military intervention – we urge the US, UK and French governments:

- To provide detailed and substantive evidence to prove that any apparent incident could not have been staged by a party wishing to bring Western powers into the conflict on their side.
- To conduct emergency consultations with their respective legislative institutions to request an urgent mission by the OPCW to the site of any apparent incident and give time for this mission to be carried out.
- To call on the government of Turkey, which has military observation posts in Idlib, to facilitate, in the event of an incident, an urgent mission by the OPCW to the jihadi-controlled area, along with observers from Russia to ensure impartiality.

We further call on the tripartite powers to join Turkish and Russian efforts to head off confrontation between the Syrian government forces and the militants opposing them by separating the most radical organisations such as Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham and Hurras Ad Deen from the rest, eliminating them, and facilitating negotiations between the Syrian government and elements willing to negotiate.

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