The Pressure on Syria Is Growing despite the Agreements between Russia and the United States

On May 27, all of the European Union’s foreign ministers gathered in Brussels, where they decided to lift the embargo on supplying weapons to the Syrian opposition. Officially, however, the decision pertains only to individual organizations on the Syrian Opposition Council so as to avoid having weapons fall into the hands of radical extremists and terrorist groups among the rebels. That is ridiculous, however, when we consider that rebels are fully capable of giving weapons to others in different units. It is also hard to distinguish a “moderate” rebel from a “radical.” Almost all of them have blood on their hands, including the blood of civilians killed for being loyal to Bashar al-Assad’s legitimate government.

The decision of the EU Foreign Ministers Council raises eyebrows, to put it mildly. Legally, the decision simply runs counter to the UN Charter and international law. How can they supply weapons to fighters rebelling against the legitimate government of a country that is a member of the United Nations? By so doing, the Europeans admit that other countries can just as well give weapons to separatists fighting the legitimate governments of EU countries. They could be IRA members, supporters of Corsican independence, Basque separatists, or even Muslim communities in European countries who believe their rights are being violated. It sets a dangerous precedent, and the European Union needs to understand all of the possible consequences, including consequences for itself. Not to mention for other countries. According to the EU’s logic, any outfit can be given weapons if they begin a rebellion against their own country’s legitimate government, even if they do it with financial support from outside (from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in Syria’s case). There is a case for that if viewed pragmatically. After all, if assistance can be provided to a coalition of radicals, extremists and ordinary terrorists, it is even more reasonable to assist the other side in the conflict — Syria’s legitimate government. That means all moral and legal limitations have been lifted, enabling the countries assisting Damascus to provide it with sophisticated weapons for use in suppressing the rebellion that was instigated by forces outside the country. After all, the weapons will be used to destroy terrorists, and that is entirely consistent with international law. The EU’s decision was obviously made under pressure from Britain and France. These are the two countries that have demanded the freedom to supply weapons to the Syrian opposition. Most Europeans were against it, as indicated by the positions of Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium, which distanced themselves from such a shameful decision, saying they had no intention of arming the rebels. In so doing, they were trying in some fashion to salvage the honor of the pan-European “uniform.” It is also strange that the European Union made the decision the same day the US and Russian foreign ministers were meeting in Paris, just 200 kilometers from Brussels, to discuss convening an international conference on Syria — Geneva 2 — to once again try and resolve the Syrian conflict through negotiations between the government and the opposition with the involvement of influential external players and Syria’s neighbors. Instead of supporting this gesture by two countries wanting to return the Syrian problem to the diplomatic settlement arena, the EU signaled that the war should continue. Catherine Ashton’s and François Hollande’s failure to say that they would adhere to all provisions of the Code of Conduct on Arms Exports was totally inconsistent with the logic of joint efforts by the international
community to end the bloodshed in Syria. Then there were additional “disclosures,” this time from France, that the Syrian Army allegedly used nerve agents against the rebels in April. The investigations by Le Monde published on May 27 are laughable. If we can believe reporters Jean-Philippe Rémy and Laurent van der Stokke, some fighters of the Liberation of Syria Brigade were attacked with poisonous gases on April 13 near Jobar in the Damascus suburbs. This is how they described it — “No odor, no smoke, not even a whistle to indicate the release of a toxic gas.” There was just a ping, like the sound of the Pepsi-Cola can can being opened. “And then the symptoms appear. The men cough violently. Their eyes burn, their pupils shrink, their vision blurs. Soon they experience difficulty breathing, sometimes in the extreme; they begin to vomit or lose consciousness.” Some cylinders 20 centimeters long fell among their positions and released a toxic gas. Only a layman could be fooled by a story like that. Chemical munitions may come in the form of shells, bombs or rockets, but not 20-centimeter tin cans. The journalists should have read the literature on the subject before scaring laymen. I get the feeling that the French journalists were well paid for their report, maybe by Qatari who forgot to explain that first they should have studied a chemical weapons manual. The sad thing is that a respected publication like Le Monde is putting out reports like this. It is unbecoming for such a well-known and well-respected newspaper to go on a trumped up propaganda campaign and desperately try to prove that Damascus is using toxic gases in its war against the rebels. After all, the objective of “news” like this is obvious — get the United States to recognize that Damascus has crossed the “uncrossable” Red Line and used chemical weapons against its own citizens. And behind all these conjectures stand the Wahhabis in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who, at London’s prompting, are striving to draw Washington into a war against Syria without the passage of appropriate UN Security Council resolutions. But Doha and Riyadh have no chance of toppling Assad without direct military intervention by the United States and NATO. That is why they have resorted to inventing things for propaganda purposes. And with all of the oil and gas riches that these two Arab monarchies have, it would not be difficult to pay two ordinary French journalists to put out a dazzling piece of investigative reporting like this. However, the “friends” of Syria failed to consider that the United States and Russia prefer to work towards a settlement on Syria and avoid confrontation. The Americans clearly learned their lesson in Iraq and Afghanistan about being drawn into another war in the region, especially one on the border with such an important Middle Eastern ally — Israel — especially one that would just put another radical Islamist regime in power. The lesson of Boston was not in vain. And no matter how much Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Britain and France huff and puff, there can be no foreign intervention against Syria without Washington. That is especially true since at its last gathering in Istanbul on May 26 the Syrian opposition coalition again failed to agree on the terms and conditions for participating in the Geneva 2 conference because of serious internal disagreements. Moreover, recent statements by Nizar al-Hiraki, the Syrian opposition’s “ambassador” in Doha, regarding the proportion of “Islamists” and “atheists” in the delegation of the National Syrian Revolutionary Coalition and complaining that the “great powers” (i.e., the United States and Russia) are unlikely to name the members of their delegations to Geneva 2, suggest that Qatari interference cannot be avoided even here. It is evidently time for Washington to rein in the high-handed Qatari “dwarf” by reminding Doha of its military base 40 kilometers from the center of Qatar’s capital, without which Emir Al Thani’s family would simply be unable to guarantee new its basic security against domestic and foreign threats. Indeed, some consider Qatar an “artificial entity” that has tribes living in it from a large neighboring country, which, incidentally, is also Wahhabi. Alexander Orlov is a political analyst and an expert Orientalist. Exclusively for New Eastern Outlook.