

US and Israel exploit Syrian/Kurdish tensions

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Tensions between Syria's Kurdish population and the government have reached a new level of intensity in the aftermath of the United States' occupation of neighbouring Iraq.

The last weeks have seen a series of disturbances and protests in predominantly Kurdish areas, arising both from the longstanding brutal discrimination against Syrian Kurds by the Syrian government, and the general political ferment of the region following the US occupation of Iraq.

There are indications that sections of the Kurdish leadership are hoping to emulate Iraqi Kurds' success in carving out a greater level of regional autonomy in a country policed by 100,000 heavily armed US troops. The Kurdish area of Syria adjoins Kurdish Iraq. There are also suggestions of direct collusion with the US administration in efforts to isolate the government of Bashar Assad in Damascus.

Trouble appears to have flared first at a football match in the northeast Syrian town of Kameshli, near the Iraqi border, where local Kurdish supporters clashed with visitors from nearby Deir-al-Zour. While the Deir-al-Zour fans shouted Baath Party slogans and "Saddam Hussein," the local Kurdish fans held up pictures of George W. Bush. Fighting and shooting broke out, triggering a panicked stampede in which several people were trampled to death. Others were shot by police, including an 11-year-old boy, as the police surrounded the stadium. Some reports suggest that a Syrian army colonel was among the victims.

Following the football match, which was to have been televised on Syrian TV, disturbances continued for several days. At least 14 people were killed, and local hospitals reported hundreds injured. Many of the public buildings in Kameshli and other local towns were burnt out, as was Kameshli's railway station. Kurdish sources claim more than 100 were killed, with most of them shot by Syrian police and military forces. Tanks were used to suppress the riots, and a curfew was imposed in some areas. According to Human Rights Watch, a funeral

procession was sprayed with machine gun fire by military jeeps.

The Syrian state news agency SANA threatened that "the severest punishments will be taken against those who manipulate the security and stability of the homeland and citizens." Sources close to the government went on to accuse Kurdish politicians of turning a soccer match riot into "an issue of political dimension."

Following the football match, Kurds protested the shootings both in Syria and internationally. In Damascus, main roads were blocked in a Kurdish-dominated suburb and several people were arrested, while students demonstrated in Damascus University. Many more were reportedly shot.

Protests also erupted in Aleppo, in northwest Syria.

Kurds protested the shootings and repression in Brussels, Ottawa and Washington. Thousands demonstrated in Arbil in northern Iraq.

Abdel Baqi Yousef, of the Kurdish separatist Yikiti group, told Reuters, "What is happening now in Syria you can really consider a war on the Kurds."

Yousef denounced efforts by the Syrian government to portray the conflict as an ethnic battle between Kurds and Arabs. "This is a conflict with the country's political authorities, not with the Arab street. We, the Arab street and democratic Arab forces, agree on democratic political and economic reform."

Two members of the Yikiti Party were recently found guilty of promoting Kurdish separatism and sentenced to 14 months in jail. Two million of Syria's 17 million population are Kurdish. As in neighbouring countries, Kurdish language publications and broadcasts are banned, and 200,000 Kurds have been deprived of all citizenship rights since 1962.

Notwithstanding the genuine character of grievances against abuses carried out by the Syrian dictatorship for decades, there is every reason to assume that the US administration is trying to manipulate the Kurdish opposition to Assad for its own ends. Reports mention US intelligence teams as having been transported from

occupied Iraq to assess the situation, while Iraqi Kurdish groups have threatened to invade Syria.

The US and Israeli press have given considerable coverage to the Syrian Kurdish question. An editorial in the right-wing *Washington Times*, for example, discovered the Syrian Kurds had been “inspired by the liberation and liberalisation of Iraq.”

The editorial demanded that the Bush administration “stand up for the Kurdish dissenters.”

The US State Department has demanded the Syrian government “refrain from...repressive measures to ostracise a minority that has asked for greater acceptance into Syrian life.”

Along with Iran, Syria tops the list of target states for US aggression that makes up President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil.” It is seen as a candidate for regime change in the neoconservative perspective for redrawing the map of the Middle East under US hegemony.

Since the invasion of Iraq, pressure on Syria has been ratcheted up. Last October, an abandoned training camp within Syria was bombed by Israeli warplanes—the first Israeli bombing in Syria in 30 years. In December, the US Congress passed the Syrian Accountability Act, which authorised the administration to implement diplomatic and trade sanctions against Syria. The Act demanded that Syria end its support for terrorists, withdraw troops from Lebanon, cease the acquisition and production of “weapons of mass destruction” and ballistic missiles, and close the border with Iraq to terrorists and weaponry.

Damascus described the Act as “really bad—bad for Syria, bad for peace in the Middle East and bad for American-Syrian relations and American-Arab relations in general.”

The Act was justified in the US media with tales of Syrian leaders squirrelling away billions in Iraqi oil revenues, and weapons of mass destruction. White House spokesman Scott McClellan proclaimed that “Syria is on the wrong side in the war on terrorism.”

In late December, Syria was further isolated by the Libyan government’s agreement to normalise relations with the US in return for Libya accepting responsibility for the Lockerbie bombing and handing over its minimal WMD programme to US inspectors.

After a few weeks’ delay, the Bush administration appears to be moving to impose sanctions on Syria from the list of options included in the Act. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage boasted that, whatever sanctions were introduced, they would be “very firm,” and they would be imposed despite Syrian cooperation against Al

Qaeda.

It is expected that US sanctions against Syria will be directed against the country’s relatively small oil industry, which would affect about \$300 million of international trade. Other options in the Act include a bar on Syrian flights landing in the US, the freezing of Syrian assets, and diplomatic sanctions. The *Jerusalem Post* hailed the likely sanctions as a “victory for the more hawkish factions in the administration” and quoted an official as stating that “this is the severest action we’ve ever taken against Syria.” “This will only be the beginning,” said another.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell this month demanded that Syria remove between 20,000 and 40,000 troops it retains in Lebanon. Syrian troops have been occupying much of Lebanon since 1976.

Caught between 100,000 US troops over the border in Iraq and the Israeli army to the west, the Syrian government has been desperate to placate both Israeli and US aggression while avoiding the appearance of doing so. As a Baath Party government, like the former regime of Saddam Hussein, Assad’s regime must at least pay lip service to defending the Palestinians, despite having in practice consistently betrayed them. State radio claimed in early March that “Syria is sticking...to its rejection of occupation, domination and aggression.” Plans to impose sanctions on Syria were described as “a malfunction in the US compass.”

The Syrian Baath Party is in a near-impossible situation, standing between the Arab and Kurdish masses whom it distrusts and loathes on one side, and US imperialism, which considers the government to be an obstacle to their control of the region, on the other. Syria has close links with the European Union (EU)—55 percent of Syrian imports originate in the EU—and it is a member of the EuroMed group. But appeals to the EU for assistance are likely to be ignored. Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, seeking to rebuild relations with the US, recently halted a Syrian/EU trade pact on the grounds that Syria had not done enough to curb the proliferation of WMDs.



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