

# US steps up pressure against Syria

Joseph Kishore  
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The Obama administration announced Monday that it is pursuing possible sanctions against the Syrian government. The move corresponds with steps by European powers to pass a resolution in the United Nations Security Council condemning the crackdown on opposition protests in the country.

These twin actions mark a shift toward stepped-up pressure on the regime of Bashar al-Assad, as Western powers seek to exploit unrest and mass protests in Syria to advance their own interests in the region. The *Financial Times* commented that the US move “heralds a likely shift by Western governments toward increasing pressure on Damascus.”

Government repression against demonstrations in Syria continued on Monday. Syrian troops were sent to the southern city of Dara’a, a center of the anti-Assad opposition. Dozens were reportedly killed, adding to the death toll from the past few days of over 100, and more than 300 since protests began in March.

While there has been considerable unease within both US and Israeli ruling circles over the regional instability that would likely accompany “regime change” in Syria, the protests are also seen as an opportunity to pressure, and possibly unseat, a key ally of Iran in the region.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said on Monday that the US was considering “targeted sanctions” as part of “a range of possible options” against Syria. The government is reportedly drawing up an executive order that would include freezing assets of senior officials and banning their travel to the US.

On Sunday, independent Senator Joseph Lieberman, no doubt expressing sentiments among a broader layer of the US political establishment, called for “getting tough” on the Assad government, including imposing sanctions and a UN arms embargo and organizing support for opponents of the Syrian regime.

The US is “not doing anywhere enough to support the

freedom fighters in Syria and to oppose Assad,” he said on CNN’s “State of the Union” interview show.

Lieberman pointed to the real motivations of any US action, declaring that Syria “has tremendous strategic significance for the region.” He noted that the Assad regime is “the only Arab ally that Iran has,” adding that it “helps Iran in so much evil that it does, being the major support of Hamas [in Palestine] and Hezbollah [in Lebanon].”

Bashar al-Assad and his family, Lieberman concluded, are “enemies of the United States.” In the same interview Lieberman called for targeting Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and his family for assassination. “Everything that Gaddafi was doing in Libya” Assad is doing in Syria, the senator said.

The *Guardian* newspaper reported that US sanctions would be aimed at putting pressure on the UK and the other European powers to impose their own sanctions. Sanctions imposed by Washington are “mainly symbolic, as the US has long had stringent measures in place against Syria and has little trade with the country,” the newspaper noted. “Sanctions by European countries, with whom Syria has extensive trade, would have more impact and several members of the Syrian government have assets in Europe.”

Britain, France, Germany and Portugal are circulating a draft statement within the UN Security Council condemning the state violence. According to a UN diplomat cited by the *Guardian*, the resolution will be scheduled for a vote within the next day or two.

The Western powers now increasing pressure on Syria are pursuing a bloody and criminal operation in Libya. They have been virtually silent on the comparable suppression of opposition in the Gulf monarchy of Bahrain, a key US ally and oil producer with close ties to Saudi Arabia. (See “Human rights groups condemn repression in Bahrain”)

Syria’s strategic significance for US imperialism lies

not so much in its natural resources—one of the major factors behind the US-European war in Libya—but its location. It borders several key countries in the Middle East, including Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon. Syria has repeatedly clashed with Israel and in 2007 was targeted by an Israeli air raid against an alleged nuclear facility.

The US has long sought to manipulate political developments in Syria. Last week, the *Washington Post* reported that the US State Department has been secretly funding Syrian opposition parties and groups. The aim is to weaken the Assad government, pressuring it to end ties with Iran and eventually replacing it with a government more amenable to US and Israeli interests.

The machinations of the US and the European powers underscore the danger that, in the absence of revolutionary leadership and an independent political movement of the working class, popular opposition in Syria, as in Libya, will be misdirected and exploited to advance the reactionary interests of imperialism.



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