

European powers discuss sanctions against Syria

Jean Shaoul
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Britain, France, Germany and Portugal are drawing up a resolution for the United Nations Security Council condemning the crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad on opposition protests in Syria. The European action follows the announcement by the Obama administration in the United States that it is also pursuing possible sanctions against the Syrian government.

A shift towards a more confrontational approach to the al-Assad regime by the major imperialist powers is clearly underway, as they seek to exploit genuine anger at the brutal regime to advance their own geopolitical interests in the region. Syria lacks significant oil and gas reserves, but it borders on key US allies—Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Israel—and is allied with Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine.

The US already has stringent sanctions in place against Syria as a “state sponsor of terrorism” under legislation dating back to 2003. Further measures would be largely symbolic, as Syria has minimal trade with the US. But Washington’s threat of sanctions was aimed primarily at pressing the European powers to follow suit. Syria has a significant, albeit declining, trade with the European Union, which accounted for 25 percent of its foreign trade in 2010.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, speaking after a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, said France and Italy were calling for an end to violence. He said, “We issue a strong call on the authorities in Damascus to end the violent repression,” adding that France would not intervene in Syria without a Security Council resolution.

Britain’s Foreign Secretary William Hague told the House of Commons, “This violent repression must stop. President Assad should order his authorities to show restraint and to respond to the legitimate demands of his people with immediate and genuine reform, not with brutal repression.”

He added that Britain was discussing with its EU allies and others the possibility of measures, including sanctions, “that will have an impact on the regime” if the crackdown on protesters continued. The Foreign Office, like the US State Department, has advised British nationals not to travel to Syria and that those in the country should leave—a far stronger warning than for Egypt where more than 1,800 people have been killed—to add to the economic pressure on Damascus.

The stance of the European powers follows reports of escalating repression by Syrian security forces after concessions made by al-Assad, including the lifting of the emergency law, failed to placate opposition. In a televised speech, al-Assad made clear that the purpose of these concessions was to remove any “excuse” for further demonstrations, a clear message that despite the lifting of the emergency laws in place since 1963, continued dissent will not be tolerated.

On Saturday night, the government sent the army into the southern city of Dera’a and poor towns around Damascus. There were reports that 25 had been killed and scores injured on Monday, although these figures have not been verified. There were also reports of house to house searches for protestors and many arrests.

Troops also went into Douma and Maadamiya, poor towns on the outskirts of Damascus. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the army moved into the coastal city of Jableh, near Latakia on Sunday, killing at least 13 people.

There are claims that hundreds of people are in detention following raids in several Damascus suburbs and in cities across the country.

The exact scale of the repression is impossible to verify. The Syrian government has excluded foreign journalists, while a number of sources providing figures on numbers killed and arrested cited as “human rights groups” or “activists” in the Western media are far from impartial. Many are headed by those with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and Sunni regimes hostile to the Alawite al-Assad regime and its ties to Shia Iran, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as forces in Lebanon. The Alawites are a minority Shi’ite sect that make up about 15 percent of Syria’s population.

A good number of the more prominent opposition spokesmen are closely associated with Washington and the various European capitals. They are seeking to change Western policy from one of “engagement” with Damascus to one of confrontation with the al-Assad regime. Washington has financed a number of Syrian dissident groups via its Middle East Partnership Initiative and sponsored the Damascus Declaration group, a coalition of Syria’s opposition parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Social websites such as Syrian Revolution 2011, which claims to have 120,000 followers, have played a prominent part in calling for protests and posting news of the unrest. According to *Syria Comment*, the website of American academic Joshua Landis, Syrian Revolution 2011 is located in Sweden and run by the head of the Muslim Brotherhood's chapter there. Ali Bayanouni, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, is backed by Saudi Arabia.

Ayman Abdalnour, another Syrian oppositionist who runs the website all4syria.org, went to Israel for a meeting with Israeli intelligence, military and political leaders arranged by Muhammad Dahlan, the former Palestinian Authority security chief in Gaza, who is reportedly helping Israel make contact with Syrian opposition members.

Acting Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his Future Movement, supported by the US and Saudi Arabia, is likewise prepared to use the Muslim Brotherhood to further his own and his sponsors' interests in the region.

Cables published by WikiLeaks have revealed that the US State Department funded an Islamic group, the Movement for Justice and Development, similar to Turkey's ruling party of the same name, set up by Syrian exiles in London. This was used to set up *Barada TV*, and finance other activities in Syria. The opposition forces have also been able to smuggle in satellite phones and electronic equipment to reinforce their activists in Syria. According to an AFP agency report, the US is sponsoring efforts to help activists in Arab and other countries gain access to technology that circumvents government firewalls, secures telephone text and voice messages, and prevents attacks on websites.

Just days ago, Ghassan Ben Jeddo, an *Al-Jazeera* TV journalist, resigned in part because of the network's "lack of professionalism and objectivity" in covering the ongoing revolutions in Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, according to a report in Lebanon's *As-Safir* newspaper.

The Doha-based satellite channel, which is kept afloat via loans from the Qatari ruler, had launched a campaign against the Syrian government and had turned the channel into "a propaganda outlet," Jeddo complained. While the station had covered the events in Libya, Syria and Yemen, it barely mentioned the bloodshed in Bahrain.

This is in line with the Qatari regime's support for a pan-Arab movement of Sunnis against Shia and its support for the broader Washington policy—particularly associated with the neo-cons—against the "Shia axis" of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

An official Assad government statement said that the Bar Association in Syria has asked a legal committee to study what was described as media forgery by a number of Arab and international TV stations and individuals, as well as "acts of instigation" aimed at destabilizing Syria.

So far, none of the major powers has embraced the demand

for regime change as they did in Libya, but there are significant calls for a change of course being made in the US.

Elliott Abrams, who had served under Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and was convicted in 1991 on charges arising out of the Iran Contra scandal of the 1980s, last month called, in the pages of the *Washington Post*, for a massive campaign against Syria.

In a March 25 opinion piece, which was endorsed editorially by the *Post*, Abrams wrote, "The demise of this murderous clan is in America's interest...a government dominated by Syria's Sunni majority—the Assad clan is from the tiny Alawite minority—would never have the close relations with Hezbollah and Iran that Assad maintains; it would seek to reintegrate into the Arab world. Iran will lose its close Arab ally, and its land bridge to Hezbollah, when Assad falls."

Abrams cited five steps to be taken against Syria: the Obama administration and all those who had supported "engagement" with Damascus should denounce Syria; the major powers should prosecute Syria in every available multilateral forum; they should ask Egypt and Tunisia to call on the Arab League to expel Syria as it had Libya; the Europeans should apply sanctions against Syria; and the US should recall its ambassador from Syria.

Abrams stopped short of calling for the US to topple the al-Assad regime. That, he said, was the task of the Syrian people. With the Europeans now talking of sanctions against Syria, it would seem that Abrams has secured two of his five demands.

Republican Senator John McCain and Independent Senator Joe Lieberman have also called for an end to efforts to engage Damascus, which had "little to show for it." In March, Lieberman told Fox News that US engagement in Libya was "sending a message" to al-Assad in Syria.

"My own hope is that the strong position that the world community has taken in Libya sends a very clear message to other autocratic or totalitarian regimes in the Middle East," he said. "And if your response to your people's uprising is to slaughter them, you run the risk that the world community will come in and do to you, and your country, what we are now doing to Gaddafi and Libya."

This warning was "particularly relevant to Assad in Syria," he warned.



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