

Syria becomes centre of struggle for regional influence

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With the failure of the anti-government movement to make significant headway against President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime, there are now regional efforts to bolster the disparate and fractious opposition forces.

Assad's regime appears, for the time being at least, to have contained the social unrest within the poverty stricken agricultural areas and prevented its spread to the main population centres of Damascus and Aleppo. Last week, a call for a general strike by the Facebook site Syria Revolution 2011 elicited little response, and the demonstrations after Friday prayers were small.

Last weekend, the government stepped up its lethal crackdown on all dissent. There were reports that 30 people were killed after Friday prayers, which have become a rallying point for protesters in a country where any public meeting requires permission, and another 20 killed over the weekend. Yesterday witnessed at least eight more deaths.

Assad's lethal use of tanks, troops, security forces, police and armed thugs has played a major role in deterring protesters. But a further factor is the character, perspective and leadership of the "opposition" forces and dissidents being promoted by the US, British and French media.

Many of the more prominent opposition spokesmen are associated with Washington, London and Paris, which seek to draw Syria away from its alliance with Iran in favour of an openly pro-Western orientation. Not a few are regime defectors and CIA operatives. A number have been funded or sponsored by Washington, including the Damascus Declaration Group, a coalition of Syria's splintered opposition parties including the Muslim Brotherhood. The leaders include Dr. Kamal al-Labwani, who was invited to the White House, Michel Kilo and Riad Seif, a wealthy businessman and former legislator.

Another oppositionist is the former Syrian vice president and wealthy businessman Abdul Halim Khaddam, who has close links to the slain former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, his son Saad Hariri, and the Saudi regime, and now lives in exile in Paris.

Khaddam's armed supporters and Islamists were involved in the protests in the coastal town of Baniyas that sought to overthrow Assad, a plot foreshadowed in the leaked US cables. The social website Syrian Revolution 2011, which has played a

prominent role in calling the protests and posting news of the unrest, is operated from Sweden and has close links with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

The US and other major powers maintain grave reservations over any open call for Assad's ouster for fear of destabilising the region, of which Syria is the linchpin. Nevertheless, their attitude has hardened. The White House, whose real target is Tehran, has put sanctions on members of the Syrian regime, including Assad himself. In announcing another round of sanctions in April, President Barack Obama included the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which he accused of assisting in Assad's repression of the opposition. The European Union and Canada have followed suit and extended sanctions to Assad.

Last week, Obama demanded in his speech on Middle East and North Africa policy that the Syrian government "start a serious dialogue to advance a democratic transition". He stopped short of calling for Assad to go, but said he "should either lead his country through a democratic transition or get out of the way".

This appears to be part of a broader policy shift by Washington. Significantly, Soumaya Ghannoushi noted in the *Guardian*, "A number of Arab activists, including the Egyptian democracy and human rights activist Esraa Abdel Fattah, were invited to an event hosted by the Project on Middle East Democracy last month—one of many recent conferences and seminars. Meetings between high-ranking US officials—such as the House majority leader, Steny Hoyer—and the Muslim Brotherhood took place in Cairo last month, while the deputy chairman of Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party has recently returned from a visit to Washington to 'discuss democratic transition'".

On May 24, the Syrian American Council organised a meeting of 400 American Syrian oppositionists in Washington to urge the Obama administration to put pressure on the Syrian government and use the International Criminal Court to indict Assad for the repression in Syria.

The Muslim Brotherhood has called for people to support the anti-government protests, and stoked sectarianism. Its objective, the establishment of a Sunni Islamic state, is backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf States as a means of combating Iranian and Shi'ite influence in the region. It does

not, however, command wide support in Syria, a country with many religions and sects, not least among the majority Sunni population.

Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who preaches on Al Jazeera, has called for Assad to be deposed, leading the Syrian president to threaten a break of all political and commercial relations at a meeting with Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassem. Assad has also suspended Qatar's \$6 billion investment in projects in Syria.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, dissidents have been meeting across Europe but have failed to come up with a common programme or strategy. In an effort to overcome these differences, next week Turkey is to host a major four-day meeting of opposition groups and activists in Antalya, including dissidents associated with the US-backed Damascus Declaration and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey's aim is to establish influence over any possible replacement for Assad's regime, or at least over parties that might play some role in government alongside the Ba'athists—as part of a compromise forced on Assad by the imperialist powers. The conference, open to all opposition groups, is to elect a national transitional council.

The meeting follows a meeting in Istanbul last month of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, long outlawed. Its press conference was carried live on Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based news service. Fronted by the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, the conference was financed and organised by Gazi Misirli, a Syrian with Turkish citizenship and a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey's hosting of the meeting was met with anger in Damascus, which banned the Brotherhood following its armed uprising against Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father, in the late 1970s. This was ruthlessly suppressed, and thousands of its supporters were massacred in Hama in 1982. In an interview with *Hurriyet Daily News*, Nidal Kaban, Syria's ambassador to Turkey, said, "For us, the Muslim Brotherhood is like the PKK is for Turkey", referring to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is banned in Turkey. "The Muslim Brotherhood has been attacking the army [in Dara'a and Baniyas]", he added.

Ankara's support for Syria's oppositionists marks a shift in its relations with Damascus, which have become increasingly close over the last 10 years. Trade and investment have expanded, visa restrictions lifted, and the two countries have even held joint cabinet meetings and military exercises. But in the last few weeks, both Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu have been to Damascus to urge Assad to engage in a "national dialogue" with the protesters, bring members of the Muslim Brotherhood into the cabinet, mount an anti-corruption campaign, allow multi-party elections and legalise protests.

Behind this hardening of attitude towards the Assad regime is Turkey's fear that any unrest in Syria's predominantly Kurdish

northeast towns, devastated by the four-year-long drought, could spill over into Turkey, especially as a descent into civil war would lead thousands of Syrians to flee across the border.

Erdogan justified Turkey's stance, saying, "The situation in Syria is the equivalent of internal politics for Turkey". Turkey was "quite concerned and annoyed" by events there, he said.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu went further, demanding that Assad immediately institute reforms to pacify the protesters. He said, "Now what he needs is shock therapy to gain the heart of his people", and, "as early as possible".

The meeting to be held in Antalya was originally to have been held in Egypt. But belatedly, Cairo refused to give permission for what would have been the first major gathering of Syria's opposition in an Arab capital for more than a decade.

Since the fall of Mubarak, Egypt's military regime has been seeking to restore its standing as a regional power-broker and to win domestic support. To this end it has distanced itself from Israel and made placatory gestures towards the Palestinians, such as an opening of the Gaza border. It has also sought to draw the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties into some new government.

Lebanon News noted that it was Qaradawi who recently presided over a massive rally in Egypt's Tahrir Square, significant due "not only to his influence among the Muslim Brothers", but as regards an "emerging Qatari-Egyptian rapprochement", epitomised by Qatari plans to invest more than \$10 billion in Egypt.

However, this shift has also been accompanied by a certain rapprochement with Iran, including tentative talks on restoring diplomatic relations after a 30-year breakdown, which may explain why permission for the rally was ultimately denied. Even so, Cairo still sees Iran as a major rival and is well aware that it faces serious opposition from the United States to any warming of relations with Tehran.

In an oblique warning to Egypt not to get too close to the Khamenei regime, US Assistant Secretary of State Jeffery Feltman said this week, "Egyptians know very well the type of problems" Iran causes in the region. Given this, the US was *not* "very concerned" over Cairo's decisions regarding its relations with Tehran.



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