Syrian crackdown deepens as fighting threatens to spread

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The brutal crackdown being waged by Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime against protests in Syria has caused an estimated 10,000 Syrians to flee Jisr al-Shughour into Turkey.

The refugees are fleeing to avoid the army seizure of the impoverished town, home to 50,000 people and the centre of protests in the past weeks.

Incapable of answering the population's demands, Damascus has poured troops, tanks and weaponry into Syria's northern provinces around Aleppo and Jisr al-Shughour. It has used helicopter gunships against Maarat al-Numan, after thousands of protesters overwhelmed security officers and burned the courthouse and police station.

The immediate aim is to deter other potentially rebellious areas, but the broader consideration is to retain control of the country's territory and prevent the emergence of a base for an opposition movement. This could provide an opening through which either the imperialist powers or a regional power like Turkey could mount a Libyan-type intervention in the north of the country.

Turkey has set up two camps that are now full of refugees, and a third will soon be full. People have fled with few possessions and now depend upon the Turkish authorities and humanitarian organisations such as the Red Crescent. At least 1,100 people have been killed in the last three months in the increasingly bloody crackdown on demonstrations calling for Assad's removal, more political freedoms and end to corruption and poverty. Over 10,000 have been arrested.

The army justifies a campaign that increasingly resembles a civil war with claims that it is pursuing the armed gangs who killed 120 security personnel a week ago. The bodies of 10 Syrian security personnel were found in a mass grave. BBC correspondents who witnessed the exhumation said four had been beheaded, and most of the bodies were riddled with bullet wounds.

Local people say, in opposition, that they were killed by army personnel after refusing to fire on protestors, with some reports of fighting between different army and security units. There are several reports of relatively senior army defections.

If these reports are true, it indicates that the Assad regime is losing control of its largely conscript army, whose soldiers have to exist on $10 a month. The army is under the direct command of Mahar al-Assad, the president's brother, and the intelligence services are under Assef Shawkat, the president's brother in law.

The attack on Jisr al-Shughour means that the Assad regime has now abandoned all pretence of trying to offer cosmetic changes to end the protests. The conflict now threatens to involve Syria's neighbours.

Israel's foreign secretary and defence minister have both publicly spoken against Assad, and Israeli forces have acted provocatively against Syrian demonstrators on its Golan border, leading Iran to claim that Israel is set on war. Iran's attack submarines have entered the Red Sea to "collect information and identify other countries' combat vessels," according to the Fars news agency.

The Turkish military has reportedly drawn up plans to send troops into Syria, supposedly to carve out a "safe area" for refugees inside Syria. Justified on the basis of preventing a flood of Syrian Kurds into Turkey's Kurdish region in the southeast of the country, it portends a direct Turkish intervention in a country with which Ankara has a long history of disputes—over territory, water and Syria's support for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

The two countries narrowly avoided a war in 1998 over Syria's hosting of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan, now imprisoned in Turkey.

Turkey recently hosted a conference in Antalya of 300-or-so Syrian oppositionists, many of whom were Kurdish nationalists or members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In an interview with *Zaman*, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan—who was once considered to be Syria's ally and has sought closer relations with Iran—criticized the Syrian

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security forces' "savagery." He also blamed the president's brother, Maher Assad, for the brutal clampdown.

With Syria falling into war, a Turkish-controlled enclave could become a base for an opposition movement to organise attacks on the regime. Raising this possibility in the *Observer*, Simon Tisdall wrote, "Two disturbing scenarios are now coming into closer focus. One is the prospect of civil war, possibly along sectarian lines. The other is the possibility of direct Turkish intervention…"

A Turkish safe haven in north or north-eastern Syria would be "potentially a home for a more local and credible opposition than the exile-dominated one that recently met in Antalya, Turkey, and a destination to which soldiers and their families could defect. A council of defected officers might then organise attacks on the regime from the safe haven. If that happened, then Turkey, a NATO member, would be entitled to request help from the US and other alliance members. Which is how, despite all assurances to the contrary, Britain could yet end up at war in Syria."

Britain's Foreign Secretary William Hague is already using the events in Syria to target Iran, Syria's main ally in the region, accusing the Iranian government of supplying "equipment" and advice on how to crush protests. Westminster has admitted that it had no evidence of Iran sending troops or paramilitaries to suppress Syrian protests. Despite this, Britain's Foreign Office said, "The UK stands by its statements… We have seen credible information suggesting Iran is helping Syria with the suppression of protests there, including through the provision of expertise and equipment."

Hague also demanded that the Red Cross be granted immediate access to conflict areas.

France, the former colonial power in Syria and Lebanon, with extensive economic interests in the country, has strongly condemned "the ever more brutal repression in Syria, including the use of heavy weapons in Jisr al-Shughour". Speaking at the Brookings Institution last week, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said that Assad had lost all legitimacy.

Britain and France are jointly demanding a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the violence and calling for the Syrian regime to carry out political reforms and release political prisoners, without calling for either military action or additional sanctions.

The US backed the resolution, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also denounced the Syrian regime for "appalling and revolting acts against its own citizens".

Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, made clear that Washington views the protests as the opportunity to break up any moves towards the formation of an alliance between Turkey, Iran and Syria. He said, "Whether Assad still has the legitimacy to govern his own country, I think is a question everyone needs to consider. If it fails, and I'm sure it will, Syria will tidy up house and the Turkey/Iran/Syria axis is over".

The resolution's demand for "humanitarian" access to Syrians threatened by violence is sufficiently broad to provide a pretext for more direct intervention.

China and Russia, Security Council members with a veto, have so far opposed this. Russia has one of its only two overseas naval bases in Syria, while both countries have their own geo-strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean which has newly discovered gas reserves. Non-permanent members of the Security Council such as Brazil, South Africa, India and Lebanon have also indicated that they are opposed to it.

Hague acknowledged, "There is no prospect of getting through the UN a resolution such as the UN resolution 1973 on Libya," in part at least because there was no clear opposition leadership to deal with and because, as yet, the Arab League has opposed any intervention, providing no legitimising excuse for action.

The major powers are also seeking to use the International Atomic Energy Association, the UN nuclear watchdog in Vienna, as an alternative means of either putting pressure on Syria, or further delegitimizing Assad's rule. The IAEA is to report Syria to the Security Council for what it claims is Syria's secret nuclear weapons project based at the military site near Deir el-Zour, possibility built with collaboration from Iran, which was bombed by Israel in 2007.

Russia is expected to block any Western attempt to have the Security Council sanction Syria over its nuclear program. But the constant efforts to implicate Iran when targeting Syria is a dangerous portent of Syria becoming the starting point for a far broader regional conflict.

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