

Attacks on US and French embassies used to step up pressure on Syrian regime

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15 July 2011

Last week's meeting of the ambassadors of France and the United States with opposition activists in Syria signaled a sharp deterioration in relations between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the West.

The US and French ambassadors to Syria took the provocative step of going to the city of Hama, a center of opposition to the Assad government, in a move that one senior US official described as an attempt to "make contact" with opposition leaders.

The visit came ahead of a planned meeting of opposition groups scheduled for this weekend. The gathering, made up of disparate organizations and individuals, is expected to discuss possibilities for a post-Assad political settlement.

There are still regular deadly clashes between the regime and opposition groups and protesters across Syria. On Wednesday, Syrian security forces killed four people in the city of Jabal al-Zawiya in the northern province of Idlib. Jabal al-Zawiya, located near the border with Turkey, has already seen fighting between anti-government forces and the authorities that left three people confirmed dead.

The following day, Syria's official SANA news agency reported clashes in the northeastern area of Deir al-Zour, where gangs of armed masked men have reportedly attacked local residents and businesses. The province has seen mass protests against the Assad regime. A major oil pipeline in the area exploded this week in an alleged act of sabotage by opposition groups, though the government has claimed it was a result of an industrial accident.

In addition, security forces shot and killed two people on the border of Deir al-Zour with Iraq, according to Abdul-Karim al-Rihawi of the Syrian League for Human Rights. The organization also claims that authorities in Damascus have detained around 20

Syrian intellectuals accused of participating in protests.

Human rights groups estimate that the Assad regime has killed at least 1,400 civilians since anti-government protests broke out in February. Some 350 army and police personnel have been killed.

Damascus responded with outrage to the US and French ambassadors' visit to Hama. The move, in a break from protocol, was not cleared with the Syrian government.

The Syrian interior ministry called the visit "contrary to diplomatic norms" and said that US Ambassador Robert Ford had met with "saboteurs and incited them to more violence and protest and to refuse dialogue."

The Assad regime has just concluded a "national dialogue" exercise aimed at defusing opposition. The vast majority of opposition groups and activists boycotted the so-called talks, in which the government offered no concrete social or democratic concessions.

A statement from the Syrian foreign ministry added that the ambassadors' visit was "clear evidence of the United States' involvement in current events in Syria and its attempt to incite an escalation in the situation, which disturbs Syria's security and stability."

In retaliation, the Syrian government appears to have orchestrated attacks on the embassies of France and the US by pro-government forces. Hundreds of armed demonstrators crowded round the two buildings in Damascus on Monday, smashing windows and spray-painting walls.

Following the attacks on the embassies, Washington has stepped up its rhetoric against Syria. On Monday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a blunt warning that "President Assad is not indispensable, and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power."

The Syrian government responded with a statement

calling Clinton's remarks "further proof of the flagrant interference of the US."

Clinton's broadside was followed Tuesday by a strongly worded statement by President Barack Obama, who told CBS News that Assad was "losing legitimacy in the eyes of his people" and had missed "opportunity after opportunity" to institute reforms. The US president also condemned what he called an "unacceptable degree of brutality" by the Syrian regime against protesters.

Obama added ominously that the US would take "whatever action necessary" to protect its overseas installations.

Washington has backed a campaign in the United Nations Security Council, led by the European powers, to censure the Syrian government for human rights violations. However, the motion was strongly opposed by Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa.

Another UN effort to condemn Syria, this time over its alleged nuclear program, has also stalled. The UN International Atomic Energy Agency voted in June to refer Syria to the Security Council for failure to cooperate with agency inspections at the Dair Alzour military complex. Russia has stated that there is no evidence of illegal nuclear activity at the site.

The Security Council did author a statement limited to calling on the Syrian government to protect diplomatic property, relating to the attacks on the US and French embassies. Syria's ambassador to the UN rejected the statement, insisting that the two embassies had "interfered in Syria's internal affairs."

Until now, the US has taken a cautious line on Syria for fear that any attempt to replace Assad with a government even more subservient to the dictates of the imperialist powers would destabilize the entire region. Since the last Bush administration, Washington's policy has been to work with Assad in an attempt to weaken Syrian relations with Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah Islamist movement.

Assad's government also has the backing of Saudi Arabia—Washington's principal ally in the Persian Gulf—which has provided financial aid to Syria in an attempt to draw Damascus away from its alliance with Tehran.

However, the US and its European collaborators have shown no sign of letting up in their reckless attempts to militarily dominate the Middle East. Even the ongoing

military debacle in Libya has not dampened the ambitions of the imperialist powers.

Like Gaddafi, who was also courted by the West for the past decade, Assad has found that Washington, Paris and London now view him as a loose cannon incapable of effectively policing the country and securing the strategic interests of the West.

Though Syria has few natural resources of its own compared with its neighbors, it is an important oil and gas transit country, and is strategically located next to Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Israel.

The latest efforts of the imperialist powers against Syria threaten to spark a wider conflagration in the volatile region.



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