

US edges toward demand for ouster of Assad in Syria

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The Obama administration has edged closer to an explicit demand for the downfall of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad as rival regional powers jockey for position in the crisis-torn country.

Administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, have told various sections of the media that Obama would issue a statement as early as this week calling for an end to Assad's 11-year rule after five months of bloody clashes between security forces and opponents of the regime. Some had predicted that the announcement would come Thursday.

Instead, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton kept to a cautious approach, refusing to be led into making a demand for the Syrian president's removal. Asked in a CBS news interview Thursday why Washington did not go "one half step further" and say "He has to go," Clinton demurred.

"Well, I think we've been very clear in what we have said about his loss of legitimacy," she said. "But it's important that it's not just the American voice. And we want to make sure those voices are coming from around the world."

Clinton then made a demand not on Assad, but on the Western European powers: "What we really need to do to put the pressure on Assad is to sanction the oil and gas industry. And we want to see Europe take more steps in that direction."

Meanwhile, the Obama White House issued a statement of its own Thursday that also refrained from calling for Syrian "regime change." Instead, it was a description of Thursday's conversation between Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Syria. "The two leaders underscored the urgency of the situation, reiterated their deep concern about the Syrian government's use of violence against civilians, and their belief that the Syrian people's legitimate demands for a transition to democracy should be met," according to the White House statement.

On Wednesday, Washington had announced a minor increase in US sanctions against Syria, targeting the state-owned Commercial Bank of Syria and the country's largest

mobile phone operator, Syriatel.

Thursday's White House statement echoed the content of what was described by the Turkish media as an "ultimatum" delivered by Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who visited Damascus on Tuesday, where he held six hours of talks with Assad.

Afterwards, the Turkish ambassador staged a visit to the city of Hama, which had been occupied by the Syrian security forces, reportedly using tanks against regime opponents and killing scores of people. Speaking in Ankara, Davutoglu said that the visit had confirmed the withdrawal of Syrian tanks and military units from the city. Hama, a central flash-point in the current round of unrest, was the scene in 1982 of a bloody suppression of an Islamist revolt. Directed by the current president's father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, the repression led to the deaths of between 10,000 and 20,000 people.

Prime Minister Erdogan claimed the withdrawal as a victory for Turkey's diplomatic intervention. "Our ambassador went to Hama and said that the tanks, security forces had started to leave Hama," he said in televised remarks. "This is highly important to show that our initiatives had positive results."

Even after the Turkish intervention, there have been reports of fresh acts of military repression, including in towns near the Turkish border.

Davutoglu, however, appeared to downplay the actions, refusing to interpret them as defiance of Turkey's demands. "It is difficult to expect an immediate pull-back under such conditions when tensions have escalated so much," the foreign minister told reporters in Ankara.

Turkey's intervention followed last Sunday's denunciation of the Assad regime's repression issued by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, in what was described as an unprecedented public speech to the Syrian people.

Abullah called the actions of the Assad regime "not acceptable" and demanded an end to "the killing machine and bloodshed." He also called upon the Syrian regime to grant "comprehensive reforms quickly." At the end of his

remarks, the Saudi king announced that he was withdrawing the Saudi ambassador from Damascus. Kuwait and Bahrain quickly followed suit.

The speech and diplomatic actions by the sheikdoms won public praise from Washington, which likely pressured for the actions. The US was clearly unbothered by the stark irony of these three powers, which had collaborated in the bloody suppression of the mass movement for democratic reforms in Bahrain, home of the American Fifth Fleet, posing as champions of democracy in Syria.

While Syrian opposition groups and Western governments have reported between 1,600 and 2,000 Syrians killed—up to a fifth of them security personnel—in the five months of repression and clashes, it is not the suffering of the Syrian people that is moving Washington and other regional powers to take a harder line against Assad, but rather strategic interests.

With \$260 million in investments in Syria in 2010, Turkey has major interests in Syria that it is intent on maintaining and expanding. There are also longstanding security concerns that have dominated often fractious Turkish-Syrian relations, particularly concerns over Kurdish separatism.

According to the Turkish daily *Zaman*, Erdogan held a security meeting with his newly appointed military brass last week for a discussion of “terrorism” and the Syrian situation.

The paper cited a secret report from Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization, estimating that some 1,500 of the supposed 3,800 Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK) fighters active in southeastern Turkey, near the Syrian border, are either Syrian Kurds or are based in Syria. While acknowledging that the Assad regime has carried out its own repression of the Kurdish movement, Turkish security officials complained that Syria has failed to extradite any captured PKK members to Turkey.

They likewise complained that Iran, while bombing bases of the PKK’s Iranian wing, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), in northern Iraq, has refused to share any intelligence with Turkey.

The implications of these complaints are that Turkey views instability in Syria as a threat to its internal national security. It likewise is hostile to Iran’s influence in Syria, which it seeks to supplant.

The Saudi monarchy, which remained silent on the Syrian events for months, even as it helped the monarchy in Bahrain implement its own bloody crackdown, likewise views the Syrian events through the prism of its hostility to Iranian influence in the region. Its sudden public intervention may be motivated by a combination of pressure from Washington and an opportunistic attempt to shift the balance of power to its favor under conditions in which

Assad may be forced out.

Iran for its part has sought to bolster the Assad regime, its only state ally in the Arab world, while attempting to win Arab support against US intervention in the Syrian crisis. The chairman of Iran’s *Majlis* (parliament) Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, met Thursday in Cairo with Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi, praising his statement calling for a “serious dialogue” in Syria.

Boroujerdi also cautioned Turkey against adopting a “threatening tone” against Syria, warning that the US was increasing its intervention in the region because it had lost its “base” in Egypt following the upheavals that toppled President Hosni Mubarak.

In its response to the Syrian events, Washington is restrained by its fear that the downfall of Assad could unleash chaos throughout the region and produce a regime less subservient to US interests. Speaking at the end of a visit to Iraq last week, US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen ruled out any direct American military intervention in Syria.

“With respect to Syria we decry the violence and the violence needs to stop as quickly as possible,” Mullen told reporters. “There’s no indication whatsoever that the Americans ... would get involved directly with respect to this.”

Washington, like the regional powers, is attempting to exploit the crisis to press its own interests in the region. The demands Clinton placed on the European powers provide an example of Washington’s self-serving diplomacy. While US investments in Syria are negligible, European oil companies have significant interests in the country, which exports about 150,000 barrels per day to Europe. Oil exports account for approximately 30 percent of the Assad regime’s revenues.

Because of the profit interests of European energy conglomerates, like France’s Total and Anglo-Dutch Royal Dutch Shell, the European Union has dragged its feet on imposing any major sanctions against the Syrian regime.

At an EU ambassadors’ meeting in Germany last week, Reuters reported, a decision was taken to draw up an “options paper” to “start the process of considering” sanctions. It is to be presented to a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Poland on September 2-3, an EU official told the news agency.



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