

Turkey issues ultimatum to Syria

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The United States, the European imperialist powers, and their NATO ally, Turkey, are preparing for possible military action against Syria.

Turkey's foreign minister reportedly presented a letter from Turkish President Abdullah Gul to President Bashar Assad of Syria on Tuesday as an "ultimatum." In the letter, Gul is believed to have warned his Syrian counterpart that Turkey would consider participating in an international intervention force.

A leaked portion of the letter reads: "I would not want you to look back some day and regret that you acted too little, too late. It is time to show your leadership and courage and lead the way for change instead of getting caught up in the winds of change."

Turkey has already increased its military presence along the 900-mile border with Syria. The Turkish army has moved two extra brigades to the border and has summoned hundreds of reserve officers for duty.

Speaking to Turkey's *Hurriyat* newspaper about Gul's diplomatic effort, a Turkish government official said that Ankara had been "trying to convince our Western allies to give some more time for Assad to implement reforms... But if a regime is not listening to the advice of its friend and neighbor and continues opening fire on its own people, that regime can no longer be Turkey's friend."

Ankara has reportedly warned that it would recall its ambassador to Damascus, as the Gulf sheikdoms have already done, as a prelude to open conflict. The Turkish government has also warned that it would freeze all investments in Syria, believed to be worth some \$260 million.

According to diplomatic sources in Ankara, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed the possibility of military intervention in Syria during a phone call with US President Barack Obama on Thursday. Erdogan reportedly requested that the US authorities postpone issuing an explicit call for Assad to step down until the Syrian leader had responded to Gul's letter.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was expected to call on Assad to resign during a press conference on

Thursday. Seemingly responding to Turkish pressure, she only issued a statement that the Syrian president had suffered a "loss of legitimacy," and that Washington was seeking to gain the support of other countries in condemning the Assad regime.

Erdogan's office issued a statement Thursday night that he and Obama had agreed to "monitor closely the steps taken by the Syrian government and to continue consultations."

While using this diplomatic terminology as his government plans for war, Erdogan has also provocatively spoken of the unrest in Syria as an "internal problem" for Turkey. Such a statement is an expression of the Turkish bourgeoisie's regional ambitions and its deep concerns about the possibility that protests and violence could spread from Syria to Turkey itself.

Ankara has presented itself as the "sole actor that can talk to Assad," according to one government source. "Assad promised us to take some steps in a short span of time," the senior official from the Turkish foreign ministry told *Hurriyet* on Friday. "We told Assad there was not much time to give."

Syrian armed forces appear to have withdrawn last week from the city of Hama, which has emerged as a center of opposition to Assad's rule. An offensive by Syrian security forces is believed to have left over 100 people dead in the city, while dozens of buildings were destroyed by tank shelling. However, fresh clashes between the army and opponents of the regime broke out last week in the cities of Homs and Dir al-Zur. Protests were held across Syria on Friday, including Aleppo and Idlib, near the Turkish border, and the capital, Damascus.

The Turkish elite fears that protest in Syria could destabilize the entire region. The two countries share a border that passes through the majority-Kurdish areas of northeast Syria and southeast Turkey. Ankara has waged a decades-long war against Kurdish nationalists there, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians. It fears that a civil war in Syria could destabilize ethnic-Kurdish regions of Turkey.

A report in Turkey's conservative *Zaman* last week claimed that many of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants still engaged in armed struggle with the Turkish state were from Syria. The newspaper claimed that the Syrian government was not doing enough to suppress the PKK, and that Syrian PKK fighters were using the unrest to cross the border into Turkey.

A Turkish invasion of Syria would also raise the specter of a far broader regional war, notably involving Iran. Though trade between Turkey and Iran has increased in recent years, the two countries remain regional rivals. Iran's longstanding relations with Assad and its backing of the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement in Lebanon are seen by the Turkish elite as a threat to their interests in the region.

Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, confirmed on Friday that Turkish forces had intercepted and impounded an Iranian arms shipment to Syria, supposedly destined for Hezbollah. There are reports in the Turkish and Israeli press that Iran has transferred \$5 billion to the Syrian government in recent weeks, in an effort to prop up their ally.

Iran has warned Turkey not to attack Syria or permit its territory to be used for an international military incursion. "Iran and Syria are two inseparable countries and allies," Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi recently stated. "Iran will stand by its friend ... under all circumstances."

Washington and Israel also vehemently oppose Syria's ties to Iran and Hezbollah. Though the US and its main Persian Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia, have courted Assad in recent years, the removal of Assad and his replacement with a more pliant tool of US imperialism would fit with Washington's goal of isolating and ultimately overthrowing the government in Tehran.

Military intervention in Syria also carries the threat of renewed conflict in Iraq. Syria shares a long border with US-occupied Iraq, including Iraq's autonomous majority-Kurdish region. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees live in Syria, often in squalid conditions, having escaped the devastation of the US invasion and occupation of their country.

An invasion of Syria could further destabilize Iraq, sending masses of refugees back across the border, and aggravating tensions between the Kurdish regime in northern Iraq and the Shiite Arab-dominated central government in Baghdad.

So far, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Maliki has refused to condemn Assad's actions and has urged Syrian protesters

not to "sabotage" the ~~state~~ ^{newspaper} Maliki no doubt sympathizes with Assad's predicament, as the Iraqi leader himself is a deeply unpopular authoritarian figure. In February, the US-backed Iraqi regime violently suppressed protests inspired by the working class uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Moreover, Maliki, a Shiite, has developed close links with the Iranian government and the Assad regime, both of which have provided him with political support.

The European powers are also preparing for an intervention in Syria. The former head of the French air force, Jean Rannou, told the web site EUobserver last week that NATO forces could destroy much of Syria's air defenses within 48 hours, before starting an "open-ended bombardment of Syrian tanks and ground troops."

"I don't see any purely military problems," Rannou said. "Syria has no defense against Western systems." However, the retired French air chief warned that such an attack would antagonize Russia, which maintains close economic and strategic ties to Syria, while straining the resources of NATO members already fighting against Libya.

Rannou also warned that the Western powers could not rely on a local proxy force in Syria to fight on their behalf, as NATO has done with the Transitional National Council in eastern Libya. "Are people in Syria ready to govern the country if Assad falls? I think that is why no one is ready to go further—because the country, the region is too fragile."

Such statements express the real motives of the major powers. The US, Turkish and the European governments are completely hostile to the democratic and social demands of the Syrian working class, and are looking to fashion a regime—with or without Assad—to serve their predatory economic and strategic interests.



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