

US, European powers demand resignation of Syria's Assad

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US President Barack Obama called for the resignation of Syrian leader Bashar Assad, in the strongest US statement against the Damascus regime since the outbreak of protests and civil conflict in Syria six months ago.

“The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,” Obama said in a White House statement issued Thursday.

Assad’s “calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside,” the US statement continued.

Obama’s call was quickly seized upon by the European powers, which made their own condemnations of the Syrian regime and demands for Assad to step down.

In a joint statement on Syria issued by France, Germany and Britain, the main European powers called on Assad to “step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people,” and that the Syrian president had “lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the country.”

Both the US and the European Union are preparing additional sanctions against Syria, especially against the oil and natural gas sector that provides much of the country’s trade income.

Echoing the tactics used against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, the Europeans and the US are backing the formation of a UN human rights panel to investigate charges that the Assad regime has committed crimes against humanity. This could lead to the referral of Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Russia has opposed the more aggressive turn against Syria adopted by the US and Western European

governments. “We do not share the United States’ and the European Union’s point of view regarding President al-Assad and will continue to pursue our consistent and principled stance on Syria,” said a Russian foreign ministry statement.

Describing Syria as one of the “fulcrums of the Middle East,” Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashovich warned that it would be dangerous not to give President Assad more time to lift the state of emergency and negotiate with the regime’s opponents.

The Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar Jaafari, claimed that the US and the European powers were “trying to settle old accounts” with Syria, and were preparing an invasion “based on lies.”

Though there are almost no independent reports coming out of Syria, due to a ban on foreign press, it is clear that Assad’s regime has ruthlessly unleashed its security forces against opponents, including the shelling of densely populated civilian areas.

An estimated 2,000 people have been killed in the Syrian unrest this year, including army and police personnel. For four days this week tanks and the Syrian navy bombarded the large seaside city of Latakia, where anti-government protests had taken place, reportedly killing over 30 people. There were also reports of continuing protests in several other Syrian cities, including Homs and several cities in Daraa province.

Above all, however, the charges leveled by the US president against his Syrian counterpart are entirely hypocritical. Obama and the political establishment in Washington are responsible for crimes whose scale put those of Assad in the shade; “imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering” is the stock-in-trade of US imperialism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Libya,

as well as the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay and other CIA-run “black sites.”

For Washington, the crimes committed by Assad against his own people serve only as a pretext to bring about a change in the Syrian regime aimed at bringing Damascus more directly into line with US interests.

As with the NATO war against Libya, the US and its European allies are seeking to intervene in Syria in order to secure a better strategic foothold in the region, while intimidating the mass working class opposition to capitalist dictatorship that has emerged across the Middle East, resulting in the overthrow of former Western allies Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia.

Assad has not faced open US and European calls for his ouster until now in large measure because there is no local proxy force in Syria comparable to the “rebels” of the Transitional National Council who fight on behalf of NATO in Libya.

Lacking a replacement regime, the West’s threats and sanctions against Syria have not yet translated into open calls for military intervention. However, what the US and the European powers cannot and will not tolerate is the threat of the Syrian protests turning into another revolutionary movement in which the democratic and social demands of the working class come into conflict with the interests of imperialism.

As in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain, the Syrian masses will confront no more determined opponents than the US and European bourgeoisies, who seek to dominate the vast oil and gas resources and transit routes of the Middle East and North Africa.

Washington has already made plans with Turkey to militarily intervene inside Syria. On Thursday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke by telephone with Obama to discuss Syria. According to officials in Ankara, even though Erdogan requested that the US not call openly for Assad’s resignation, the two leaders discussed plans for possible military action.

“First and foremost, the people of Syria must tell Assad to go,” a government spokesman in Ankara told the AFP news agency. “The Syrian opposition is not united and we haven’t seen yet a collective call from Syrians to tell Assad to go, as occurred in Egypt and Libya.”

While Ankara remains formally committed to dialogue with the Assad government, it is deeply

concerned that unrest in Syria could impact on Turkey itself, sending floods of refugees across its border and provoking unrest in the Kurdish-majority region that spans large areas of Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

The Turkish state has fought a long war against Kurdish separatists, resulting in thousands of civilian casualties and frequent human rights abuses against the largely impoverished Kurdish people. Ankara has complained about Kurds from Syria fighting inside Turkey, and warned the Assad regime to clamp down on the cross-border movement of militants.

On Wednesday and Thursday Ankara bombarded a Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) base inside Iraq, reportedly in retaliation for PKK attacks that killed two Turkish soldiers. Turkish armed forces used warplanes and artillery against 28 targets inside northern Iraq, in the most intense attack on the PKK’s bases there since renewed cross-border fighting broke out in July. Ankara has also moved thousands of extra troops close to the Syrian border.



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