

Western powers have Syria in their sights

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Having achieved regime change in Libya through military intervention, the Western powers and their regional allies now have Syria firmly in their sights as part of their plans for re-dividing the resource-rich Middle East.

They are intent on using the six-month long protests and civil conflict that the Baathist regime of President Bashar al-Assad has brutally suppressed—at least 2,000 people are believed to have been killed and more than 10,000 arrested—to unseat Assad in favour of a more pliant tool of US imperialism.

Such a government would sever its links with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and reach an accommodation with Israel, as part of Washington's goal of isolating and ultimately overthrowing the government in Tehran.

The US and the European powers have thus far stopped short of threatening military force against Syria, but this could change. Ben Rhodes, the director of strategic communications at the National Security Council, said that Libya provided a model for how the US would use its military power where its interests were threatened, but, "How much we translate to Syria remains to be seen"

"The Syrian opposition doesn't want foreign military forces but do want more countries to cut off trade with the regime and break with it politically", he added.

Washington, London, France and Berlin are working together to bring the broadest possible diplomatic and economic pressure to bear on Syria in what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called an "international chorus of condemnation", to lay the basis for more aggressive action in the future.

On Tuesday, the Obama administration announced fresh sanctions, banning Americans from doing business with Assad's foreign minister and two other senior officials, and freezing their assets in the US. The US had earlier imposed sanctions on more than 30 Syrian officials, including Assad, and companies, and banned the import of Syrian oil or petroleum products.

The move was largely symbolic, as the US has no trade relations with Syria. More significant economic sanctions were imposed by the European Union. On Friday, the EU, which takes almost 95 percent of Syria's oil, banned the import of all oil and gas products from Syria

These sanctions follow condemnations of the Syrian regime and demands for Assad to step down from US President Barack Obama and France, Germany and Britain.

The imperialist powers have been unable to get the UN Security Council to agree on a resolution calling for an arms embargo and financial sanctions against Assad and members of his regime due to opposition from Russia and China, but they are still seeking to get a resolution condemning Syria's violent crackdown on the protests.

In an ominous move, reminiscent of the bogus claims of Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" used as the pretext for regime change, US and Israeli intelligence are claiming that Syria has a cache of chemical weapons and the means to deliver them.

Fox News cited the "belief" of US intelligence services that "Syria's nonconventional weapons programs include significant stockpiles of mustard gas, VX and Sarin gas and the missile and artillery systems to deliver them."

Israel's ambassador to the US stated candidly "We see a lot of opportunity emerging from the end of the Assad regime."

Turkey, a key US ally in the region, is stepping up the pressure on Assad and could yet act as a Western proxy for a military attack on Syria.

A few weeks ago, Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, delivered an ultimatum to Damascus calling for an immediate cessation of violence by Syria's security forces.

Ankara has threatened to recall its ambassador to Damascus, as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms have already done, as a prelude to open military conflict. The Turkish government also warned that it would freeze all its investment in Syria, believed to be worth some \$260 million. The Syrian economy is already reeling under the conflict, the cost of palliative measures announced by Assad earlier in the year, and the loss of tourism that accounts for 15 percent of the economy.

Last week, Turkey's president Abdullah Gul declared he had "lost confidence" in the Assad regime, "Clearly we have reached a point where anything would be too little too late", he said.

"Today in the world there is no place for authoritarian administrations, one-party rule, closed regimes", he continued, threatening Assad that such governments could be "replaced by force" if their leaders did not make changes.

One of Turkey's concerns is that Damascus has not done enough to suppress the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara believes operates from bases in Syria's Kurdish

northeastern provinces and supplies weaponry and other support to Kurdish oppositionists in Turkey's southeast. The PKK seeks to establish an autonomous Kurdish state, adjacent to Turkey's borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq, also home to significant Kurdish minorities.

This year has seen numerous demonstrations and protests in Istanbul, Izmir and the southeast, which security forces have dispersed with lethal force. Ankara has also bombed Kurdish villages in Turkey and Iraq following terrorist attacks on its armed forces, presumed to be the work of the PKK. Turkey also fears that the on-going unrest in Syria will lead to an influx of refugees from Syria, as happened after the 1991 Gulf War when hundreds of thousands of Kurds sought to flee Iraq.

Ankara has thus far been stymied by the lack of credible and united opposition forces to replace the Assad regime. It has therefore hosted several conferences of Syrian dissidents in an attempt to form a unified opposition with which Turkey and the major powers can do business. Last week, Syrian oppositionists meeting in Turkey announced the formation of the Syrian National Council, consisting of 94 members and with Burhan Ghalioun as president.

Ghalioun, an academic at Paris's Sorbonne University who has lived outside Syria for most of the time since the 1970s, took part in Syria's short-lived Damascus Spring in 2000-2001, soon after the present president took over from his father.

Syria's Kurdish oppositionists largely boycotted the conference, accusing Turkey of seeking control of the anti-Assad movement through the medium of the Muslim Brotherhood. Barzan Bahram, a Syrian Kurdish writer, stated, "The Muslim Brotherhood is trying to exploit the change that is about to take place in Syria for their own gain. And the Turkish government is throwing its full support behind the Islamic groups to bring them to the forefront."

In addition, Saudi Arabia is financing Sunni Salafist armed militants, many of whom returned radicalised by their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Salafists are cultivating sectarianism against the minority Shia and Alawite sect to which the Assad and top brass in the military belong. Last month saw the discovery of covert arms shipments to Syria by Saudi-backed Lebanese politicians allied to former Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

Syrian opposition figures also plan to visit Egypt September 8, to seek backing from the military junta.

Washington has long had plans to unseat Assad, but has lacked a credible opposition leadership. To this end, it has since 2005 funded external opposition groups, usually secular and often former regime supporters, and begun to train oppositionists. It has also funded the "human rights centres" that have provided the casualty figures and "eyewitness" reports to social network sites and the corporate media. The Damascus Centre for Human Rights is in partnership with the US National Endowment for Democracy while others receive funding from the Democracy Council and the International

Republican Institute.

The deposing of Muammar Gaddafi by Western-military intervention has become a signal for the anti-Assad movement to shift openly to military conflict. Previously, the oppositionists denied Assad's claims of their being armed, despite the fact that Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist oppositionists have been using antitank weapons and heavy machine guns for months, and the deaths of scores of military and security personnel.

On Sunday, Mohammad Rahhal, a leader of the Revolutionary Council of the Syrian Coordination Committees, told the London-based, Saudi-owned *As-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper that the Council had decided to arm the Syrian "revolution". He said, "We made our decision to arm the revolution which will turn violent very soon because what we are being subjected to today is a global conspiracy that can only be faced by an armed uprising."

"The Arab countries, which are supposed to help and support us, are cowards, and they refuse to act," he added. "Therefore, we will follow the Afghan example; when the Afghans were asked: Where will you get the weapons? They answered: As long as the United States is here, there will be weapons."

Syrian protesters now carry banners calling for a no-fly zone over Syria, like that imposed in Libya. One banner read, "We want any [intervention] that stops the killing, whether Arab or foreign."

The threats are being taken seriously by Tehran. On August 28, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told the official IRNA news agency, "Syria is the front-runner in Middle Eastern resistance (to Israel) and NATO cannot intimidate this country with an attack ... If, God forbid, such a thing happened, NATO would drown in a quagmire from which it would never be able to escape."



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