

Arab League suspension of Syria brings military intervention closer

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The vote by the Arab League to suspend Syria brings a step closer the possibility of external military intervention into what is already a de facto civil war.

A meeting in Cairo Saturday told Syria it will be suspended from the Arab League and face sanctions if it does not end its crackdown on anti-government protesters.

A total of 18 countries agreed to the suspension, beginning Wednesday. Only Syria, Lebanon and Yemen voted against, with Iraq abstaining.

Tens of thousands protested the decision in Syria in the squares of Damascus, Aleppo, Raqqa, Lattakia, Tartous, Hasaka and Sweida, and there were attacks made on the Saudi Arabian, Qatari and Turkish consular facilities.

For the most part, popular support for the Ba'athist regime of Bashar Assad in Damascus and other cities, despite its repressive character, is animated by fear of the alternative—the installation of a sectarian Sunni Islamist regime that will persecute Alawites, Christians and other minorities, and the growing danger of foreign military intervention.

The headline justification for the suspension of Syria from the Arab League—a death toll in the conflict rising above 3,500—has no credibility. Not only are many of the despotic regimes that signed on to the resolution currently carrying out the brutal suppression of their own people, including host Egypt, but they are also directly involved in arming and organising the opposition movement.

The suspension recalls the February 23 decision to suspend Libya from membership of the Arab League that facilitated NATO's backing of an insurgency aimed at regime-change. The only apparent difference at this point appears to be whether the United States, France, the UK and other major powers will work more covertly this time through proxy regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Revealingly, Assistant US Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman attended the Cairo meeting. Qatar's prime

minister and minister of foreign affairs, Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr al Thani, was forced to allude to the obvious parallel between Libya and Syria, saying “no one is talking about a no-fly zone. People are trying to mix up the cases.”

Syrian spokesmen, including Assad, have repeatedly insisted that the opposition movement is heavily sponsored and armed by foreign powers and did so again following the vote. Syria's deputy foreign minister, Faisal al-Mikdad, said that terrorist groups within Syria “are being financed in an unofficial way by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Jordan”. As a result of what was an armed uprising, he said, “Syria has lost more than 1,150 martyrs from the army and security forces.”

A number of commentators have written candidly on what has been happening over the past months behind the scenes, leading up to and inspiring the Cairo decision. CNN's Ben Wedeman dismissed the spurious notion that the assembled Arab leaders were “new converts to people power.” He wrote, “As much as aging Arab autocrats fear their people, they also fear Iran.”

Wedeman listed a series of actions by Washington that have intentionally strengthened Iran's influence in the Middle East. These include the ousting of the Taliban, a Sunni movement bitterly opposed to Shia Iran, in Afghanistan; the deposing of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the region's previous alternative power, and his replacement by a pro-Iranian government; and the disastrous Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

“Against this backdrop is an across-the-board diminution of American power in the Middle East,” he warned. “Above and beyond regional issues, the US economy—and thus, its political clout—is in decline.... In short, a huge vacuum looms in the region, and Iran could be the chief beneficiary.”

This is the attraction of regime-change in Syria, Iran's chief ally, for the Arab states.

It is also important for them to compete with growing Turkish influence in the Middle East. The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) was set up under Turkey's auspices, and the Free Syrian Army, an exclusively Sunni group that claims 10,000 to 15,000 members, also has its operational base in Turkey.

The SNC has two main groups, the Damascus Declaration, which is dominated by US-backed stooges, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey, Egypt and other Arab powers compete to exert influence on events through the Brotherhood. It opposes dialogue with the Assad regime. Not all its component parts support Western military intervention, but a great many do—in the form of demands for a Libyan-style “no-fly zone”.

There are also various Salafist groups close to Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The decision to suspend Syria was accompanied by a decision to recognise the Syrian National Council for the first time.

Writing in *Ha'aretz*, Zvi Bar'el commented, “By so doing, the Arab League is assuming the role of ‘regime maker,’ which acts rather than merely responds.”

The decision could open the door to similar recognition by the Western powers, Russia and others in another echo of events in Libya with the National Transitional Council.

The *Guardian* on November 4 contained an analysis by Alastair Crooke, the British diplomat, MI6 officer and leading adviser to the UK and European governments, entitled “Regime change in Syria is a strategic prize that outstrips Libya.”

He noted a meeting this summer of a “senior Saudi official” who “told John Hannah, Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, that from the outset of the upheaval in Syria, the king has believed that regime change would be highly beneficial to Saudi interests: ‘The king knows that other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.’”

“This is today's ‘great game’—losing Syria. And this is how it is played: set up a hurried transitional council as sole representative of the Syrian people, irrespective of whether it has any real legs inside Syria; feed in armed insurgents from neighbouring states; impose sanctions that will hurt the middle classes; mount a media campaign to denigrate any Syrian efforts at reform; try to instigate divisions within the army and the elite; and ultimately President Assad will fall—so its initiators insist.”

The aim, following Libya, is to mould “the Arab awakening towards a western cultural paradigm,” he notes. Hypothetical planning for regime change “only

became concrete action this year, with the overthrow of Egypt's President Mubarak. Suddenly Israel seemed vulnerable, and a weakened Syria, mired in troubles, had heightened strategic allure. In parallel, Qatar had stepped to the fore. Azmi Bishara, a pan-Arabist who resigned from the Israeli Knesset and self-exiled to Doha, was according to some local reports involved in a scheme in which al-Jazeera would not just report revolution, but initiate it for the region.... Qatar [was] directly involved as a key operational patron of the opposition.”

Crooke, who is in a position to know, states that after securing the agreement of President Nicolas Sarkozy for Syrian regime-change, “Barack Obama followed by helping to persuade Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan—already piqued at Assad—to play the transitional council part on Syria's border, and lend his legitimacy to the ‘resistance’.”

While many commentators such as Bar'el acknowledge that the decision by the Arab League could “pave the way to a military offensive on Syria, similar to the one on Libya” and “could also imply intent to attack Iran,” most reject the possibility due to the danger that this would provoke a wider regional war.

Such apparently “logical” reasoning is spurious. In imperialist politics, just because something is “too horrible to contemplate” does not mean it will not happen.

The Obama administration is as aware as CNN's Wedeman of the declining global position of the US, hence the ramping up of its military and political interference in the Middle East as both a counter to and an effort to shape the “Arab Spring” in its interests. Regime-change in Libya was the initial gambit in an ongoing effort to secure control of the oil riches of the Middle East and Central Asia region—a prize the imperialist powers will pursue even at a cost of untold bloodshed.



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