

Syria targeted for imperialist intrigue after Arab League suspension

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Wednesday's three-day deadline by the Arab League for Syria to meet its terms is a political provocation. It presents terms that the Syrian government cannot possibly accept, to allow other Middle Eastern regimes to continue an imperialist-backed intervention against Damascus.

The Arab League plan calls on Syria to withdraw its tanks from restive cities, cease attacks on protesters, release prisoners and engage in dialogue with the opposition. Under present conditions, this would require the Baathist regime of President Bashar al-Assad to commit political suicide. It would mean agreeing to abandon military action, while armed insurgents are operating under the protection of Turkey, the Gulf States, Lebanon and, behind the scenes, the United States and France.

The ultimatum brings to mind the February 1999 Rambouillet Agreement, which laid down demands on Serbia used only to justify war—by giving Kosovo de facto independence and NATO forces free and unrestricted access to the country. Suspension by the Arab League also provided NATO with a free hand to wage war on Libya.

The “opposition” referred to by the Arab League is the Syrian National Council, based in Turkey and now recognised de facto by the Arab states. The SNC rejects discussions with Assad unless he agrees to quit office.

Even as the ultimatum was presented, there were reports of military attacks by the Free Syrian Army, also based in Turkey, as well as Lebanon, killing dozens of regular army soldiers and attacking key facilities near the capital, Damascus.

On Wednesday, members of the FSA fired shoulder-mounted rockets and machine guns at a key Air Force Intelligence base north of Damascus. Unconfirmed reports state that 20 security police may have been killed or wounded in the attack. That same day, they announced the creation of a temporary military council aimed at ousting Assad from power, under the leadership of Colonel Riad al-Asaad.

An ambush by “opposition activists” earlier this week,

said to include FSA personnel, in the southern province of Deraa led to the deaths of 34 troops and 12 insurgents.

Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, Colonel Ammar al-Wawi, the commander of the FSA's Ababeel battalion, boasted of “other areas” where his battalion had carried out attacks in northern Syria, including the towns of Maaret al-Numan, Kafr Nabl, Jabal al Zawyeh and Kfar Roumeh.

The FSA, a sectarian, exclusively Sunni outfit, claims to have evolved to include 22 battalions and upwards of 10,000, 15,000 and even 25,000 members, spread across the country. It recently announced the defection of Colonel Rashid Hammoud Arafat and Colonel Ghassan Hleihel from the Republican Guards.

The SNC's membership claims are widely disputed. Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, estimates that fewer than 1,000 soldiers have deserted the regular army. But whatever the numbers involved, it is indisputable the FSA operates under the wing of the Turkish government of Recep Erdogan.

In many ways, the most significant aspect of the summit meeting at Rabat is how closely the Arab League—led by the despotic monarchies of the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—are working with Turkey.

Writing in the *Telegraph*, Shashank Joshi noted: “It is remarkable that so many stagnating police states are coming out against the murder of protesters, even if their outrage is neither sincere nor consistent.... Earlier in the year, its members suspended Libya and urged that a no-fly zone be imposed over the country. That proved to be crucial in easing the way for the UN to green-light Nato's war against Colonel Gaddafi, which put Arab and Western forces into battle alongside each other for the first time since the first Gulf War.”

Joshi concluded, “At the beginning of the year, it was scarcely imaginable that Arab states would end up cheerleading a Nato war in North Africa, and now their attention has moved to the very centre of the Levant.”

In paving the way toward another military intervention, the

key aim of the Gulf States and other Arab powers is to weaken Iran, by nullifying its key regional ally in Damascus.

Direct Western military intervention as in Libya, at least for now, is not the most likely variant. It is opposed by Russia and China, which have blocked action against Assad on the United Nations Security Council. Moscow and Beijing recognise that, as in Libya, the US is pressing forward with plans to dominate the Middle East and its oil riches by eliminating Iran as a regional power and strengthening its allies—Turkey, Egypt, Israel and the Gulf States.

Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, said of the situation in Syria, "We see television reports that say some new force, the so-called Free Syrian Army, I believe, organised an attack on a government building.... This is already completely similar to real civil war. It is necessary to stop violence no matter where it comes from. It is an important thing because violence in Syria comes not only from government structures."

Under these circumstances, intervention by Turkey is looking increasingly possible, with Ankara functioning as an imperialist proxy force with the backing of the United States, France and the UK. Turkey has already imposed unilateral sanctions and cancelled plans for joint oil searches, and is mooting cutting electricity supplies to Syria.

Erdogan this week warned Assad, "Those who fire on their own people will go down in history as leaders who feed on blood," adding: "Nobody now expects the people's demands to be met."

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, present in Rabat, declared that it is "no longer possible to trust the Syrian government".

As well as sponsoring the SNC and organising the provocations of the FSA, Turkey has repeatedly threatened to set up a "safe haven" in northern Syria—which would mean direct military intervention.

Opposition groups are already demanding such action. The issue for Ankara, however, is to secure the backing of the major powers. Turkish foreign policy adviser Abdullah Gul told the media: "The protection of civilians is certainly very important. But what matters is an international resolution on the issue. It seems out of the question for us to do that on our own."

For its part, the US is hardly any longer seeking to conceal how closely it is working with Turkey, prompting Simon Tisdall to write in the *Guardian*: "In this push towards the Syrian endgame they plainly have the enthusiastic backing of the US, for whom they are effectively acting as a local proxy in opposition to external actors such as the pro-regime Russia."

Ben Rhodes, Barack Obama's deputy national security

adviser, stated baldly: "We very much welcome the strong stance that Turkey has taken and believe it sends a critical message to President Assad that...he should step down."

State Department Deputy Spokesman Mark Toner also went on record to call the FSA attack on the intelligence base north of Damascus "understandable". "It's not surprising that we are now seeing this kind of violence," he said. Although the US has contacts with an array of Syrian opposition figures, he said, Toner was "unaware" of any dealings with the FSA.

France is playing a yet more open role in the campaign to oust the Assad regime. Foreign Minister Alain Juppé is holding talks with Turkey, yesterday and today. Speaking to French parliament on Wednesday, he threatened that "the vice is tightening" around the Assad regime. "The Syrian people will win their fight and France will continue to do everything to help them."

Among the issues to be discussed is the uniting of the disparate forces of the Syrian National Council—led by a motley group of CIA "assets" known as the Damascus Declaration and the Muslim Brotherhood—and anti-Assad forces long sponsored by Paris.

The two leading figures cited give a flavour of the character of the regime intended to replace Assad's: equally repressive, but more aligned with Washington against Iran.

The most prominent is Rifaat al-Assad, Assad's uncle and the younger brother of the former president, Hafez al-Assad. He personally oversaw the Hama massacre in February 1982, a brutal action to repress a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood that reportedly led to tens of thousands of deaths. His exile was solely the result of his efforts to secure his own succession, initially by means of a failed military coup involving 55,000 troops.

Second in rank is Abdul Halim Khaddam, Syria's vice president from 1984 to 2005. A Sunni Muslim, he was a loyalist of Assad's father who was removed amid rumours of an attempt to seize power. He has publicly acknowledged receiving assistance from Washington and the European Union in his efforts to overthrow the Assad regime.



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