Western powers back Syrian insurgents as Arab League deadline expires

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The Arab League's three-day ultimatum to the Baathist regime of President Bashar al-Assad to implement a one-sided peace plan expired, with Assad refusing to back down.

The ultimatum included demands on the Syrian regime to halt the attacks on protesters, withdraw its tanks from restive cities, release all political prisoners, engage in a dialogue with the opposition and admit observers into the country. There were no corresponding demands on the oppositionists, who are widely acknowledged to be armed. As such, the demands were expressly designed to elicit just such a refusal and provide a fig leaf for another campaign of regime change in the resource-rich Middle East.

Assad accused the Arab League of creating a pretext for Western intervention that would trigger an "earthquake" across the Middle East.

"After eight months the picture is clear to us… It is not a question of peaceful demonstrations but an armed operation," he told the *Sunday Times*.

Even before the ultimatum expired, the imperialist powers and their allies in the Middle East were meeting to prepare a military intervention to unseat Assad, via the establishment of "safe havens" for civilians inside Syria.

Such "havens" would be a Libyan-style launching pad for armed insurgents, backed by the Western powers and their clients in the Middle East, to unseat Assad and install a more reliably pro-Western stooge. The key aim of such a military intervention is to weaken Iran, by neutering its key ally in the region.

Press reports reveal the degree to which the major powers and their clients in the Middle East have been collaborating with the Syrian insurgents and are now preparing to back the Islamists as an alternative political force in Syria.

France is playing a key role in the preparations to overthrow Assad. On Friday, Alain Juppe, France's foreign minister, met with his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu in Ankara to coordinate their two countries' efforts to oust the Assad regime. A key issue was how to unite the disparate, disunited and utterly discredited political forces that pose as the "opposition" to the ruling elite.

France sought to cover over its discussions with Ankara with the usual diplomatic niceties about seeking a UN Security Council resolution condemning the violence and paving the way for increased sanctions. But the UN route used to legitimise criminal wars against Iraq and Libya has been stymied by opposition from Russia and China, who fear that yet another US sponsored regime change would cut across their interests in the region. Russia has its sole naval base in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port of Tartous, while both countries have commercial and energy interests in Syria.

Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov issued a statement saying, "We are concerned with news of ongoing aggression by extremist gunmen such as those which took place in Homs, Hama and Idlib in recent days with the provocative aim of forcing security agencies and the army in Syria to retaliate, and then launching a campaign via international media outlets."

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticised the Arab League for suspending Syria's membership and called for restraint on both sides.

With the UN route blocked, officials from the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan met in Paris on Friday to discuss plans to establish "safe havens" in Syria. Turkey,

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NATO's sole member in the Middle East, would set up a safe haven close to its northern borders

with Turkey, while Jordan, a client of both Washington and Riyadh, on whom it is dependent for its economic survival, would establish a similar base in the south of the country, near its border with Jordan.

Earlier this year, King Abdullah of Jordan sought membership of and was accepted by the Gulf Cooperation Council. He too faces ongoing protests against his regime. Last week, this unelected monarch became the first Arab leader to call for Assad to step down. He told the BBC, "I believe, if I were in his shoes, I would step down."

On Saturday, Turkish newspapers carried reports that Ankara had plans to set up "no fly" zones to protect civilians inside Syria if the violence continued. Such no fly zones would provide air cover for military attacks against Syrian security forces, as they had done in Libya.

Davutoglu had earlier met with leaders of the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella group of pro-Washington oppositionists, Islamists and Kurdish parties, who along with the exiled Muslim Brotherhood have called for a "no fly" zone and Turkish military intervention in the country to "resolve" the situation. Mohammad Riad Shakfa, leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood exiled in Turkey, told a press conference, "The Syrian people would accept intervention coming from Turkey, rather than from the West, if its goal was to protect the people."

The self-styled Free Syrian Army (FSA), made up of Syrian army defectors who have also sought the protection of and are based in Turkey, has similarly called for international backing for a no-fly zone and two buffer areas inside Syria to support their attempts to unseat Assad.

Riad al As'ad, a former Syrian colonel and leader of the FSA, told *Milliyet*, "Our operations are increasing and we will reach the presidential palace." He added, "The regime is going to fall. It may take longer if there is no international foreign assistance, but it's not going to stay. It's finished."

The FSA launched a rocket attack on the Baathist party building in downtown Damascus on Sunday. Earlier in the week, the FSA claimed responsibility for an attack on a Syrian Air Force intelligence barracks in Damascus that reportedly killed 20 men.

Britain has formally opened talks with the SNC. According to press reports, William Hague, the foreign secretary, is to meet members of the opposition in London next week after three months of informal talks. The Syrian oppositionists from the SNC and the National Coordinating Committee for Democratic Change will also hold talks with senior officials in Downing Street. In reality, talks have been ongoing for months, according to the latest press reports.

This paves the way for their formal recognition as the country's representatives instead of Assad, although officials denied this was imminent. On Friday, Frances Guy, a former ambassador to Lebanon, was appointed to liaise with them.

The US clearly supports the armed opposition to the Assad regime. On Friday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Syria could slide into civil war. She told NBC, "I think there could be a civil war with a very determined and well-armed and eventually well-financed opposition that is, if not directed by, certainly influenced by defectors from the army."

In a separate interview with CBS, she said that it was clear Assad's days were numbered. "Look, Assad's going to be gone," she said. "It's just a question of time."

Israel, which has equivocated over backing Syria's insurgents on the grounds that the Baathist regime presented no threat to Tel Aviv and kept silent so as not to alienate support for Syria's insurgents, has now come out openly in backing Assad's ouster.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak said of Assad, "I think that he went beyond the point of no return, no way that he will he resume his authority or legitimacy… And it's clear to me that what happened a few weeks ago to Gaddafi ... and what happened ultimately to Saddam Hussein, now might await him."

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