

# Syrian crisis draws in regional and major powers

Jean Shaoul

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The Arab League's announcement of economic sanctions against President Bashar al-Assad's regime has set in motion a rapidly escalating crisis that is drawing in both the regional and major powers.

The offensive being mounted against Syria now threatens a wider conflagration in the region.

For all the Arab League's assertions that the sanctions are designed to avert foreign intervention, the opposite is the case. Plans for a military intervention are well advanced, with Turkey and France playing leading roles.

As in the case of Libya, the imperialist powers are using the 22-member Arab League—made up of feudal despots and Egypt's military junta, engaged in its own lethal crackdown on protestors—to legitimise such a criminal venture.

The Arab League ultimatum included demands on the Syrian regime to halt its attacks on protesters, withdraw its tanks from restive cities and engage in a dialogue with the opposition, while making no corresponding demands on oppositionists armed and backed by Turkey and the Gulf States.

The ultimatum was expressly designed to elicit a refusal from Syria. Sanctions are the first step towards a military intervention aimed at installing a more pliant Western stooge and isolating and ultimately furthering the campaign to overthrow the Iranian government, Syria's key ally in the region.

Turkey, although not a member of the Arab League, was present at its meeting as an observer. Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, said that Assad's government had "come to the end of the road".

Ankara has played a prominent role in ratcheting up the pressure on Damascus. It has given shelter to Syrian army defectors and organised in the Free Syria Army

(FSA), which is launching armed attacks inside Syria. The FSA, along with the exiled leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, has called for a "no fly" zone or "humanitarian corridor" and Turkish military intervention in the country to "resolve" the situation.

Ankara has also sponsored and promoted the Syrian National Council (SNC), made up of discredited former regime supporters, CIA assets, Islamists and others, as an opposition group that could form the basis of a future government.

Turkish foreign ministry officials have admitted that Ankara has contingency plans for variously "no fly", "buffer" zones, "safe havens" or a "humanitarian corridor" involving the deployment of its troops on Syrian soil.

No-fly zones would provide air cover for military attacks launched from the buffer zones against Syrian security forces, as they did in Libya. Turkey has also threatened that militant Kurdish attacks launched from Syria would constitute grounds for military action, with President Abdullah Gul warning Damascus to this effect.

France is working closely with Turkey to establish territorial bridgeheads on Syria's borders, as well as with Lebanon and Jordan to the same purpose.

After talks in Turkey last week, French foreign minister Alain Juppe said that the situation was "no longer sustainable" and that the United Nations must permit the setting up of safe havens for civilians fleeing Syria. He said, "We have done this in other situations and it is the only way in the short term to ease the plight of the population".

Davutoglu backed his call, saying that time was running out for the Assad regime. "Its days are numbered, that is obvious. It is totally isolated today," he said.

Assad, referring to Turkey, a former ally, said in a speech, “The dream of the Ottoman Empire remains vivid in some minds. Although they know it is only a pipe dream, they try to exploit political parties raising religious slogans to boost their influence in the Arab world.”

With the UN route barred by Russia and China, which hold veto powers in the Security Council, the major powers are seeking other forums. Last Friday, as Juppe was holding talks with Davutoglu, France hosted a meeting in Paris of officials from the US, France, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt and Jordan to discuss their plans to set up buffer zones in southern and northern Syria.

To create a possible *casus belli*, a UN Human Rights Council commission report, authored by representatives from the US, Turkey and Brazil, said that “crimes against humanity have been committed” by the Assad regime, including the deliberate killing of children. This is despite the author’s admission that they do not have reliable evidence, saying that its facts and findings are attributed only to unspecified “reliable sources,” as no independent monitors were allowed into Syria to take statements.

The manoeuvrings against Syria are understood in Iran as part of a wider strategy on the part of the Western powers to isolate Tehran.

Last week, the US, the European Union and Canada announced new measures against Iran in the wake of a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that suggested—on the basis of old discredited evidence—that Iran was working towards acquiring a nuclear weapon. This is on top of four rounds of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council.

Britain has gone further, imposing additional financial sanctions against Iranian banks, including severing all contact with Iran’s Central Bank. Iran’s parliament responded by voting on Sunday to expel Britain’s ambassador and downgrade diplomatic relations.

On Tuesday, angry anti-British demonstrations took place. Militant students attacked the British embassy compound, ransacking offices, burning the British flag and smashing embassy windows, while others broke into an official residency some miles away. That the Iranian government allowed the demonstrations and attacks to take place indicates the seriousness with

which they view the escalating crisis around Syria.

Russia has taken an increasingly hard line in defence of the Syrian regime, calculating that its fundamental geo-strategic interests in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Caspian Basin are under threat.

Moscow has opposed the Arab League’s sanctions and repeatedly accused the US and European powers of escalating the crisis in Syria. It issued an angry response to a joint statement by the US and EU on Monday demanding the Syrian government end violence against protesters. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said, “Right now, the most important thing is to stop acting by means of ultimatums and try to move toward political dialogue”.

Moscow views military intervention against Syria, its key ally in the region, as increasingly likely. It is to send its only aircraft carrier group to the Syrian port of Tartus, its only naval base in the Mediterranean, for “training” next spring.

While Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, Russia’s former chief of naval staff, said that the timing had nothing to do with the situation in Syria, he admitted that the presence of a military force other than NATO’s would be very useful because “It will prevent the outbreak of an armed conflict”.

A pro-Washington government in Damascus would mean the end of Russia’s naval base in Tartus.

The deployment of Russian naval forces follows that of the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George HW Bush in the Eastern Mediterranean, near Syria, and the announcement that the government in Libya has agreed to the construction of a major NATO military base in Cyrenaica.

The Obama administration’s bid to assert US dominance in the Middle East has set the region and the world on a dangerous course towards confrontation and war.



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