

Mounting evidence of US involvement in Syrian crisis

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The involvement of the United States and other major powers in the Syrian crisis is becoming ever more overt. As it does, the danger of all-out war and a broader regional conflict poses itself with greater immediacy.

On the ground, Syria's President Bashar al Assad has made another effort to appease the demands of the Arab League—offering to allow observers into the country as a step to ending the bloody clampdown on opponents of his regime, in return for the cancellation of economic sanctions and other conditions that have little chance of being accepted.

Syria clearly expects rejection. Over the weekend, the government held military manoeuvres involving live-fire of long-range missiles, armoured units and helicopters, with the aim of testing “the capabilities and readiness of missile systems to respond to any possible aggression.”

State television declared the drill showed Syrian missiles and troops were “ready to defend the nation and deter anyone who dares to endanger its security.”

The Arab League powers, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in particular, together with Turkey, are playing the leading role in organising the Syrian opposition—led by the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army. Both bodies are based in Turkey. Ankara and Riyadh have as their end goal breaking the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran through regime-change and the installation of a Sunni-based majority regime.

This is a shared strategic aim with Washington, as well as France, the UK and other European powers.

All are working with various regional proxies due to the widespread hostility to overt intervention within the Syrian population and from Russia and China, who view the aggressive drive for regional hegemony by the US as a threat to their strategic interests.

The Obama administration is openly supportive of regime-change and is in constant discussion with Turkey on the possible setting up of “humanitarian corridors” and “no-fly zones” on Syrian soil that would be the basis for military intervention by Ankara.

Washington has despatched the USS George H.W. Bush, an aircraft carrier, off Syria's coast.

On Friday and Saturday, US Vice President Joe Biden held talks with Turkish Foreign Secretary Ahmet Davutoglu, President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on a common strategy regarding Iran and Syria.

Prior to his arrival, he told the press that Iran is “close to a pariah nation” and described Assad as “the problem right now.”

Asked directly about the possibility of a Turkish military incursion into Syria, he replied that there was “no final decision” on that, but he would be discussing the issue with Erdogan.

Yesterday, the official Syrian news agency SANA reported that border guards had blocked an infiltration attempt from Turkey by about 35 “armed terrorists”. The wounded escaped back to Turkey, where they received aid from the Turkish army and were driven away in Turkish military vehicles, according to SANA.

The SNC is following an agenda for regime change set by Ankara, Riyadh, Washington and their allies. The head of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, gave a series of interviews last week making clear the key aims of the opposition.

The Paris-based academic fronts a disparate coalition of nominal “liberals”, ex-Baathist figures and Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, that includes many CIA assets.

Speaking of the SNC's foreign policy, Ghalioun pledged that a new Syrian government would end military relations with Iran and stop arms supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Instead there would be a reorientation towards an alliance with the Arab regimes, above all the Gulf States.

On CNN he accused Iran of “participating in suppressing the Syrian people.”

In his most extensive interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Ghalioun described the current relationship between Syria and Iran as “abnormal ... A new Syria will be an indispensable part of the Arab League ... Our future is truly tied to the Arab world and the Gulf in particular.”

“There will be no special relationship with Iran,” he said. “Breaking the exceptional relationship means breaking the strategic military alliance.”

“As our relations with Iran change, so too will our relationship with Hezbollah,” he continued, adding, “Our relationship with Hamas will be through our relationship with the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization].”

Ghalioun said that the SNC was “in continuous discussions with our friends.” It was “funded by donations from generous Syrian businessmen” and had “been promised help from several Arab states ... Among them are the Libyans, for example.”

Ghalioun speaks of disaffection in the Syrian business elite being driven by its mounting economic crisis. An article in the *Gulf News* gave another possible source of such support.

In a piece entitled, “Challenge for political Islam in Syria”, Sami Moubayed notes that “it is no secret that the Muslim Brotherhood, inactive and mute within Syrian society for over 30 years, has started to re-emerge, rather strongly, in different Syrian cities.”

And “in recent years, political Islam, once attractive only to poor people, has now infiltrated high society and is becoming a magnet for the urban rich. In posh neighbourhoods of Damascus, for example, wearing the hijab is astronomically high, so is mosque-going and closed Islamic lessons.”

He described the exclusively female followers of Islamic teacher Munira Al Qubaisi as “a very powerful network among the wives, daughters, and mothers of affluent businessmen in Damascus ... The Qubaisis control schools, mosques, and entire neighbourhoods, where alcohol, for example, is not served at restaurants, and where hijab-wearing young women drive around in brand new BMWs and Audis.”

Asked whether talks over military intervention options have “picked up recently,” Ghalioun replied, “Yes, there is a great acceleration. We are in contact with our friends.”

“These matters are still in negotiation. But threats sometimes develop into plans,” he said.

He urged such steps to be taken. “We say it is imperative to use forceful measures to force the regime to respect human rights,” he insisted.

The SNC agreed formal relations with the Free Syrian Army at a meeting in the southern Turkish province of Hatay between Ghalioun and FSA head Riyadh al-Asaad.

Ghalioun’s aim is to bring the FSA under his political control and to reassure Washington that the civil war will not be exploited by Islamists and will lead to a trustworthy pro-Western regime.

He described his goal as helping “the army to organize all

the forces carrying arms in cities and neighbourhoods to avert the potential of armed elements that we don’t have control over. We do not want, after the fall of the regime in Syria, armed militias outside the control of the state ... Let us be clear: there are no Salafist armed groups in Syria.”

Commenting separately on its own interview, the *Wall Street Journal* stated bluntly, “This year’s political uprisings in the Middle East increasingly have devolved into a power struggle pitting the US and its Arab allies, such as Saudi Arabia, against Iran and its allies. Syria is viewed as the central prize, due to its strategic position and role in the Arab-Israeli struggle.”

Referring to Ghalioun’s description of Syrian ties to Iran as “abnormal,” the *Journal* wrote, “Such a position is welcomed by US and European officials, who believe Mr. Assad’s overthrow could cripple Iran’s ability to project its power into the Palestinian territories and Egypt.”

Russia has responded forcefully to the escalation of aggression against Syria, sending the aircraft-carrying missile cruiser, Admiral Kuznetsov, and two escort ships, with the eventual destination being the Syrian port of Tartus.

The *Guardian* also notes that on Thursday “a consignment of Russian Yankhont anti-ship cruise missiles arrived in Syria” as part of an “active arms contracts worth \$4bn ... *Moscow Times* reported recently that Russia’s investment in Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism amounts to \$19.4bn in 2009.”

The Shia-dominated Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki was one of three states in the Arab League that opposed Syria’s suspension. Mailiki has now made his most pro-Assad statement to date, out of fear of the eruption of a regional war.

“The killing or removal of President Bashar in any way will explode into an internal struggle between two groups and this will have an impact on the region,” he said. “It will end with civil war and this civil war will lead to alliances in the region. Because we are a country that suffered from the civil war of a sectarian background, we fear for the future of Syria and the whole region.”



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