

Washington pressures Arab League to move against Syria

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The Obama administration dispatched Jeffrey Feltman, assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, to Cairo yesterday for talks with the Arab League about Syria. His mission is to ensure that a negative verdict is rendered on the Arab League observers' mission to Syria—paving the way for a push for a United Nations Security Council resolution legitimising military intervention to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Feltman's visit was preceded by multiple statements from the White House insisting that the Syrian regime had failed to meet the demands for a withdrawal of troops from the cities and an end to repression.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said: "as sniper fire, torture, and murder in Syria continue, it is clear that the requirements of the Arab League protocol have not been met... We believe it's past time for the Security Council to act."

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said, "the violence hasn't stopped; far from it."

"The United States is one of the parties which is seeking to rekindle violence by its mobilisation and incitement", Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdisi responded. "The US ... statements are a gross interference in the work of the Arab League", and "an attempt toward deliberate unjustified internationalization of the situation in Syria".

The US stepped up its anti-Assad rhetoric after the League's 100 or so monitors gave indications that they were considering a favourable verdict on the regime's honouring of the terms of the agreement. A spokesman for the Arab League said the Syrian military has now withdrawn from major cities and moved to the outskirts. Arab League official Adnan al-Khudeir said, "There is noticeable progress".

Arab League ministers meet this weekend and the monitoring team's preliminary report will be ready by Sunday, delayed by a day—probably due to US pressure to beef up its criticisms before recommendations are sent to a high-level ministerial meeting that has not yet been timetabled.

On Monday, Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby said the monitors had achieved the release of 3,484 prisoners and that heavy weapons have been removed from cities, but also stated, "Yes, there is still shooting and yes there are still snipers. Yes, killings continue."

The US is most likely confident that it will get what it wants from the Arab League, but it has made clear that anything less will be denounced as capitulation by the Arab League to Syrian deception.

On Wednesday, it appeared that the Arab League has been called to heel. Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, the head of the League's task force on Syria, was in discussions with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in New York—seeking "technical help and to see the experience the UN has, because this is the first time the Arab League is involved in sending monitors, and there are some mistakes".

Behind the scenes, Washington is working with the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) and various regional powers, including Qatar, to get a military campaign in place, either through the Security Council or through various proxy forces, as it did in Libya.

The SNC, based in and sponsored by Turkey, is made up of CIA assets, defectors from the Assad regime and Islamists, chiefly the Muslim Brotherhood. It operates as a front for the US, Turkey and the Gulf States led by

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who are united in seeking regime change in Syria as part of ongoing efforts to isolate Iran.

On Wednesday, the SNC announced that an agreement with the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria (NCB)—a Syrian-based umbrella group of Arab nationalists and pseudo-socialist groups—had fallen apart. This was due specifically to the SNC's support for imperialist military intervention. SNC member Khalid Kamal said the two sides disagreed over the percentage of NCB representation and the NCB's failure to call for the UN Security Council to protect civilians.

"There's only a handful left in the SNC that don't want to move toward armed intervention", said one anonymous SNC member. In a wide-ranging interview with *The Majalla* magazine, SNC President Burhan Ghalioun made clear that the major powers are utilising the Arab League as a portal through which they can intervene in Syria. "No one, not even the Arab League, has confidence in this regime", he said. "I think the majority of Arab League ministers who supported the initiative anticipate its abortion by the regime, and intend to refer the issue to the UN Security Council."

This was, he acknowledged, an effort to get around the veto of previous efforts to secure a UN resolution by Russia and China and give the impression that military intervention was an Arab initiative. "There is no alternative to the Arab initiative", he said, but "the Arab League has to direct all its efforts to move from simply an Arab initiative to an Arab initiative adopted by the UN Security Council".

Ghalioun was forced to deny the accusations, posed by *The Majalla*, from "opposition figures" who have "described the council as an Islamic structure standing in for the Muslim Brotherhood with a secularist spokesperson represented by you".

He described the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as the main pillar of the protection system, proof that "We

will not wait for foreigners to protect civilians but we will develop means to protect civilians from inside Syria ...".

He then praised the "Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia", for "taking the most powerful position in supporting the Syrian people politically as well as backing the Arab initiative. The Arab League initiative was initially a Gulf initiative ...".

The FSA, made up of Sunni military defectors and armed by Turkey and the Gulf States, has announced this week that it will mount "huge operations" against "vital interests" of Assad's regime.

FSA commander Colonel Riad al-Asaad said, "We can't force him off with peaceful demonstrations, so we are going to force him by arms to leave".

"We are preparing for big operations and have no faith in Arab League monitors or their useless mission", he added.

The FSA and other militias have been waging a military campaign that has led to the deaths of 2,000 security personnel, which has been concealed by the media in order to portray events as Assad's forces targeting purely peaceful protests. The FSA has ambushed military convoys and attacked an airbase and a Ba'ath party office in Damascus. On December 23, Islamist suicide bombers targeted two security bases, killing 44 people.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak told Israel's foreign affairs and defence committee this week that Assad had only "a few weeks" before he would be toppled. Referring to Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, he said the collapse of the Ba'athist regime would be "a severe blow to the radical axis".



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