

# US presses for Arab League finding against Syria

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The Arab League, meeting in Cairo on Sunday to discuss the observers' mission to Syria, called on the government and opposition to stop all acts of violence immediately and "let the mission move freely." The League declared that the mission, whose monitors were allegedly subjected to "harassment" by both the Syrian government and the opposition, would continue its work according to the protocol agreed with Syria last month.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of increasing criticisms of the mission's "toothlessness" by the Obama administration and the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syria Army (FSA), which are backed by Washington, and calls for the League to hand over to a United Nations investigation.

It also came amid escalating violence in Syria, where a suicide bomber killed 26 people and wounded 63 others in a bombing Friday in Damascus, the Syrian capital. The blast hit a bus station and a nearby police station.

Thousands of mourners attended state-sponsored funeral services for the dead Saturday, chanting slogans including, "We are not scared of America, the mother of terrorism" and "The people want the state of emergency." State officials suggested that the bombing was carried out by the Western-backed opposition, with Information Minister Adnan Mahmoud stating that the explosion "is part of the scheme based on terrorism and killing that has been targeting Syria for nine months." The Interior Ministry released a statement promising to use an "iron fist" to repress terrorism.

Western-backed Syrian opposition forces claimed that the bombing was a conspiracy by the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad to discredit the opposition.

At the Cairo meeting, the Arab League admitted to

"mistakes," but defended the observers' mission, saying it had secured the release of prisoners and the withdrawal of tanks from cities. It also agreed to increase the number of observers, currently 163, and said it may seek "technical assistance from the United Nations."

On Friday, Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, who holds the chair of the Arab League commission on Syria, called for UN personnel and human rights specialists to help monitor the ongoing civil war in Syria and the Assad regime's compliance with the League's proposals. He claimed that Syria was not implementing the terms of the Arab League peace plan and said monitors should not remain in Syria to "waste time." Al-Thani asserted that the Syrian army had not withdrawn from cities and the killing had not ended.

After reports of what appear to have been bitter divisions, Qatar's demand was rejected by the Arab League as being too obviously an attempt by Washington to wrest control of the mission via the UN, which has a long history of operating as a tool of US imperialism.

While the line-up of forces has not as yet been reported, it seems likely that it was the Gulf monarchies that led demands for the UN to take over. Other Arab states will be anxious that they too may later be on Washington's list for regime-change. But another factor in their calculations is the overwhelming opposition throughout the Arab world to any foreign intervention, let alone by US imperialism and its allies.

Nevertheless, the Arab League report due later this month could still provide the US with the pretext it requires by condemning the Assad regime.

Qatar's proposal to hand over the mission to the UN would fundamentally change the character of the

agreement with Syria, billed as an Arab initiative to end hostilities and arrange a national dialogue between the government and oppositionists. The agreement, originally drawn up by the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and later adopted by the League, called for all parties to end the violence and for the Syrian government to withdraw its troops from the cities, release political detainees arrested since the outbreak of the protests last March, hold talks with the opposition, and hold multi-party elections.

Assad was forced to sign following unprecedented pressure from the Arab League: the suspension of its membership, the withdrawal of some Gulf ambassadors from Damascus, and sanctions against senior Syrian officials and its banks. This was in addition to sanctions by the US, the European Union and Turkey aimed at crippling Syria's beleaguered economy, and a UN Human Rights report alleging Syrian security forces had committed crimes against humanity—including torture, rape, the killing of 4,000 Syrians and the detention of 14,000 people since March.

Qatar's demand to transform the initiative into a de facto UN mission is intended to pave the way for the US and its allies to push for a UN Security Council resolution legitimising a military intervention to install a pliant US stooge in Syria as part of their on-going efforts to isolate Iran.

From the start, the Arab League plan was a ruse to entrap Assad. Hence his reluctance to go along with it until pressured by Russia. Syria's long-time ally has its only naval base in the Mediterranean at Tartus and extensive defence and economic ties with Damascus. It is seeking to avoid a Libyan-style intervention against Syria, while at the same time acting to ensure that, should Assad fall, it can maintain its strategic interests in the country.

The Obama administration was outraged when the Arab League observers reported on January 2 that Syrian forces had withdrawn from the major cities and taken up positions on the outskirts. Adnan al-Khuder, an Arab League official, said, "There is noticeable Arab League progress."

Washington flatly contradicted Khuder's report, saying that Syria had failed to meet the League's demands, and called for the Security Council to act. The Qatari prime minister was summoned for talks with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in New

York. Jeffrey Feltman, assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, was sent to Cairo to press for a more critical report ahead of the League's weekend meeting.

As far as Washington is concerned, the mission's role is to provide a suitable Arab cover for international intervention against Syria, possibly in the form of "safe havens" inside Syria along its borders with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, led by forces from Turkey, Qatar and Jordan. Last month, the GCC agreed a \$5 billion aid programme for the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco, neither of which are members of the GCC.

Washington is holding talks with and supporting the fractious opposition forces in the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, trying to get agreement between the SNC and opposition forces in Syria organised in the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). While the SNC and FSA have called for international intervention, the NCC has opposed it.

The SNC welcomed the Arab League's decision to call on the UN for support, saying: "A joint effort between the Arab League and the United Nations Security Council represents a first step towards the urgent and necessary measures to assure the protection of civilians, and to ensure that the regime does not commit additional bombings and killings."



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