

# Obama backs regime change in Syria amid calls for intervention

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**19 January 2012**

President Obama voiced his support for regime change in Syria on Tuesday as calls for intervention in the Middle Eastern country continued to mount.

Following White House talks with Jordan's King Abdullah, Obama declared the actions of the Syrian government "unacceptable" and reiterated the US demand that President Bashar al-Assad relinquish power.

"We're continuing to see unacceptable levels of violence inside that country, and so we will continue to consult very closely with Jordan to create the kind of international pressure and environment that encourages the current Syrian regime to step aside," Obama stated.

Obama praised the Jordanian monarchy for being among the first Arab states to demand Assad's ouster. As in the US-NATO intervention in Libya, Washington is attempting to line up various dictatorial regimes close to US imperialism to provide a cover for a Western intervention aimed at toppling the Syrian government.

Chief among these regimes is Qatar. In an interview on the CBS news program "60 Minutes" over the weekend, Qatar's ruling emir, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, declared his support for troops from other Arab states to be sent into Syria, ostensibly to stop the repression.

"For such a situation to stop the killing, some troops should go to stop the killing," Sheik Hamad said in response to an interviewer's question as to whether he was in favor of a military intervention by outside Arab states. The statement drew an angry rebuke from the Syrian regime, which categorically ruled out any agreement to allow foreign troops on Syrian soil.

Declaring itself "astonished" by the statement of the Qatari emir, Syria's foreign ministry said that the country "rejects the statements of officials of Qatar on sending Arab troops to worsen the crisis... and pave the way for foreign intervention."

Qatar played a key role in the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, first serving as a leading backer of an Arab League resolution supporting foreign intervention on the pretext of setting up a "no-fly zone." It then took the lead in

training and arming the so-called rebels in Libya, while sending large numbers of Qatari troops into the country to lead forces seeking to topple Col. Muammar Gaddafi and coordinate their ground attacks with NATO's bombing campaign.

While Qatar previously enjoyed close relations with Damascus, the oil-rich Gulf state's monarchical regime has closely aligned its policy with that of Washington, withdrawing its ambassador last summer and becoming one of the fiercest critics of the Syrian government.

On Wednesday, Syrian state media charged the Qatari regime with seeking to reprise the role it played in the Libyan intervention by arming and funding insurgents seeking to topple the Assad government. The *Tishrin* newspaper charged that Qatar had played a "negative role" since "the start of the crisis," including through "the financing of armed groups."

Last month, the *American Conservative* carried an article by former CIA agent Philip Giraldi providing a detailed description of the operation that is being mounted by the US and its NATO allies to foment armed conflict inside Syria.

"Unmarked NATO warplanes are arriving at Turkish military bases close to Iskenderum on the Syrian border, delivering weapons from the late Muammar Gaddafi's arsenals as well as volunteers" from Libya, Giraldi wrote. "Iskenderum is also the seat of the Free Syrian Army, the armed wing of the Syrian National Council. French and British special forces trainers are on the ground, assisting the Syrian rebels while the CIA and US Spec Ops are providing communications equipment and intelligence to assist the rebel cause, enabling the fighters to avoid concentrations of Syrian soldiers."

Turkey appears to be taking the lead in these operations, reportedly providing a base near the border for training Syrian insurgents and discussing with its NATO allies the possibility of imposing a no-fly zone over Syrian territory.

According to the United Nations, which has relied largely on Syrian opposition sources for its information, some 5,000 Syrians have been killed since mass demonstrations against

the Assad government began some 10 months ago. The Syrian government has claimed that 2,000 members of its security forces have died in fighting with armed groups.

Increasingly, the crisis is taking on the characteristics of a sectarian civil war, pitting elements of the country's Sunni majority population against the regime and its security forces, which are dominated by the Alawite Shia sect of Assad. In the central city of Homs, the scene of some of the bloodiest clashes, there have been reports of killings and terror used to divide neighborhoods along sectarian lines.

Within the United States, there is a steady drumbeat of discussion of a military intervention in the media and political establishment think tanks. Typical is a January 17 article published by the *Atlantic* entitled "It's Time to Think Seriously About Intervening in Syria." The author, Steven A. Cook, a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, makes the case for a "human rights," "responsibility to protect" intervention, citing Libya as an example of what supposedly can be done in Syria.

Just as in Libya human rights served as a pretext for a US-NATO war aimed at seizing control of the largest oil reserves on the African continent, so too, Cook makes clear, a Syrian intervention would have its public justifications and its real geo-strategic motives.

"If there is no intervention and political will to stop Assad's crimes remains absent, the world will once again have to answer for standing on the sidelines of a mass murder," writes Cook. "It is also hard to ignore the possibility that bringing down Assad would advance the long-standing American goal of isolating Iran. Any post-Assad government in Damascus would not likely look to Iran for support, but instead to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. That would be a net benefit for Washington and others looking to limit Iran's influence in the Arab world."

George Friedman of the private intelligence agency Stratfor made a similar case, writing this week: "Should the al Assad regime—or the Syrian regime without al Assad—survive, Iran would therefore enjoy tremendous influence with Syria, as well as with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The current course in Iraq coupled with the survival of an Alawite regime in Syria would create an Iranian sphere of influence stretching from western Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. This would represent a fundamental shift in the regional balance of power and probably would redefine Iranian relations with the Arabian Peninsula. This is obviously in Iran's interest. It is not in the interests of the United States, however."

Just as Washington is pushing for regime change in Syria as part of its wider bid to prepare for war against Iran, which it views as an impediment to establishing its hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, so

Russia and China, which have extensive interests in both Iran and Syria, have strongly opposed any military intervention.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Wednesday that Moscow would use its veto if necessary to block any resolution in the United Nations Security Council authorizing the use of force in Syria. China has indicated support for the Russian position.

Both China and Russia abstained on the resolution authorizing the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, which provided a legal fig leaf for the US-NATO war. In the war's aftermath, both countries have suffered significant losses in terms of their interests in Libya, with the US and its NATO allies the principal beneficiaries.

Earlier this month, Russia dispatched an aircraft carrier-led naval battle group to the Syrian port of Tartus in what Moscow described as a gesture of "friendship" between the two countries. Russian officials have also dismissed US protests over a Russian ship's delivery of arms to Syria, noting that Moscow's actions—while they may have cut across unilateral US and Western European sanctions—have violated no international agreements.

Meanwhile, the Arab League is set to meet this weekend to discuss the future of its monitoring mission in Syria, whose mandate expires this week. Qatar is among those leading calls for the mission to be scrapped in order to clear the way for direct foreign intervention.

The Western-backed Free Syrian Army called for the Arab League to pull out its monitors, saying they had "failed in their mission." The group's leader, Col. Riyad al-Asaad, told Reuters news agency that the group was calling on the Arab League "to turn the issue over to the UN Security Council and we ask that the international community intervene because they are more capable of protecting Syrians at this stage than our Arab brothers."



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