

Arab League calls for Syria's Assad to step down

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The Arab League, in line with Washington's drive to install a pro-US regime in Syria and isolate Iran, has used its observer mission to Syria to ramp up the pressure on Damascus and call on President Bashar al-Assad to stand aside in favour of one of his two vice-presidents.

In so doing, it has provided Washington and the European powers with the cover they require for regime-change, paving the way for an anti-Assad resolution at the United Nations. The organization of the Arab bourgeoisie has once again demonstrated that it functions as Washington's proxy in the region.

Only last week, President Barack Obama declared the actions of the Syrian government "unacceptable" and repeated his demand that Assad relinquish power. Now he has the Arab League's imprimatur.

The League issued its call for Assad to step down following its meeting over the weekend. Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, who chairs the League's commission on Syria, said the League wanted Assad to go peacefully. He cited the Gulf Cooperation Council's brokering of an agreement for Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand over power to his deputy as a model for Syria.

The League's meeting in Cairo was ostensibly called to review the progress of its fact-finding mission, which officially expired on January 19. In the statement issued following the meeting, the League called on Damascus to start talks with the opposition within two weeks and form a government of "national unity" within two months.

Such demands go far beyond the remit of the mission—to monitor the plan agreed with Syria to oversee the cessation of violence on both sides. The mission was from the outset a ruse to entrap Assad, which was why he was so reluctant to go along with it

and only agreed under pressure from Russia. Moscow, anxious to avoid another Libyan-style intervention, is at the same time determined to maintain its strategic interests in Syria should Assad fall.

Under the agreement, originally drawn up by the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and later adopted by the Arab League, the regime was to withdraw its troops and heavy weaponry from towns and cities, allow peaceful demonstrations, release political prisoners detained since the start of the demonstrations last March, and hold multi-party elections.

The head of the League's mission, Sudan's General Mohammed al-Dabi, said that despite some shootings and explosions, the situation had improved while the monitors were in the country. He called for the team of 165 observers to be strengthened.

The Arab League foreign ministers were reported to be bitterly divided. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are key players in the plan to unseat Assad. They are widely reported to be backing the opposition forces, including the so-called Free Syria Army (FSA), which has declared its intention of unseating Assad by armed force. Qatar had called for Arab troops to be sent to Syria, a move rejected by Sudan, Egypt and Algeria.

The oil-rich monarchs wanted the League to condemn the mission as a failure, terminate it immediately, and hand over its remit to the United Nations Security Council in order to pave the way for direct military intervention. But the majority of foreign ministers rejected this as being too obviously an attempt to cede control to Washington via the UN, which has a long history of operating as a tool of US imperialism. They feared enraging their own restive subjects, who are fiercely opposed to any outside intervention, least of all another intervention by US imperialism and its allies.

In the end, the GCC states largely achieved their main purpose—obtaining the Arab League’s backing, with the exceptions of Algeria and Lebanon, for regime-change. They thus formally agreed with the rest of the foreign ministers to extend the mission for another month.

But no sooner had the Arab League issued its statement than Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal torpedoed the mission. He said that his country, which provides most of the funding for the mission, would pull out its observers because “the Syrian government did not implement the Arab plan.” Qatar and the rest of the Gulf States followed suit the next day.

Furthermore, al-Faisal called on the “international community,” meaning the UN Security Council, to step in and put pressure on Syria, saying “We are calling on the international community to bear its responsibility, and that includes our brothers in Islamic states and our friends in Russia, China, Europe and the United States.”

According to Kuwait’s *Al-Qabas*, the Gulf States will take part in a high-level Arab delegation to Russia to press Moscow to end its support for Assad.

Qatari Prime Minister al-Thani said the League would take its resolution that Assad step aside, form a national unity government with the opposition and hold multi-party elections to the UN Security Council. This move is unlikely to be successful given the opposition of Russia and China, both of which wield veto power on the Security Council, to any Libyan-style intervention against Syria.

Russia has just announced that it will, in defiance of a US, EU, Turkish and Arab League embargo on arms to Syria, sell Damascus 36 Yak-130 combat jets. These are trainer aircraft that can also carry an arsenal of air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles.

Syria immediately and angrily rejected the Arab League’s demands. SANA, the official news agency, said that Syria considered that the plan “contradicted the will of the people,” and was a “violation of its sovereignty and flagrant interference in its affairs.” It denounced the League demands as part of a conspiracy against the Syrian people.

The Paris-based Syrian National Council, a fractious opposition group of CIA assets, former regime supporters and Islamists, which was critical of the Arab League’s mission from the start, said the League had

not gone far enough. Omar Idlibi, a spokesperson for the group, demanded that Assad quit immediately.

But Hassan Abdul-Azim, the leader of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria (NCB), which operates in Syria, said that the Arab League resolution was a step in the right direction and put more pressure on Syria.

The European powers have already moved into action. Germany’s ambassador to the UN, Peter Wittig, seized on the Arab League’s resolution and called on the Security Council to back it, calling the plan a “game changer.” British Foreign Secretary William Hague, speaking before a European Union meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels, said a Security Council resolution on Syria was overdue. The UN ambassadors from Germany, France and Britain discussed their next moves with some members of the Arab League on Monday.

The EU foreign ministers welcomed the Arab League resolution and called on President Assad to “step aside immediately to allow for a peaceful and democratic transition.” They urged the Security Council to request a briefing from the Arab League “as soon as possible.”

At the same time, they extended sanctions against 22 Syrian officials whom they have accused of human rights abuses and eight companies that financially support the Assad regime. The EU has already banned the sale of arms to Syria, the import of Syrian crude oil and new investment in Syria’s oil industry.



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