

After Russia's UN veto, US talks of "coalition of the willing" against Syria

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The veto by Russia and China of a United Nations Security Council resolution will not halt ongoing preparations for Western-backed intervention against Syria. The discussion on the resolution was a political manoeuvre from the outset, designed either to force Moscow and Beijing into agreeing to a UN cover for a Libya-style operation against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, or justify a predetermined alternative route to regime-change.

This goal has nothing to do with the humanitarian posturing of the US, France, the UK and the various despots that make up the Arab League. The aim is to install a pro-Western government dominated by Sunni forces close to the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, thus further isolating Iran, the main ally of the current Syrian regime.

Iran is seen as the only regional obstacle to total US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and Caspian Basin. Eliminating the Assad regime and weakening Tehran would also serve to push Russia and China out of their remaining bases of influence.

The US, Britain and France sought to use a demand from the Arab League, supposedly based upon the report of its observer mission to Syria, to condemn the crackdown by the Assad regime and call for Assad to hand over power to his deputy in preparation for a new government that would include the opposition. According to the proposed resolution, this would be followed by new elections.

The invocation of the League's mission was thoroughly dishonest. The observers had found that the violence was abating and that the Syrian government was complying with most of the Arab League's requirements. They had called for an extension of their mission in Syria. The response of Saudi Arabia was to end its participation while the Emir of Qatar went on CNN to call for Arab military intervention.

Qatar assumed the role of Arab League chair by paying off the Palestinian Authority, whose turn it was to hold the post, with \$400 million in aid. It used its position to suppress the observers' report, demand that Assad quit, and call off the mission. It then forwarded the "recommendation" that Assad step aside to the UN.

While some aspects of the Arab League's proposals were omitted from the final draft, the resolution, if passed, would have still provided the US with a cover for action against Syria. It welcomed the League's demands, including for Assad to leave, while not detailing them as in earlier drafts of the resolution.

As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed out, the resolution's call to "withdraw all Syrian military and armed forces from cities and towns and return them to their original home barracks" was an ultimatum the regime could not possibly accept, given that it faces an armed insurrection (backed by the West). That demand was inserted for the purpose of creating a *casus belli* for more direct military intervention.

Moscow also objected to the resolution's placing the entire blame for the violence on the regime. It stated that "measures must be taken to influence not only the government...but also the armed groups, because unless you do it both ways, you are taking sides in a civil war."

As the debate on the vote reached its belated deadline, the Syrian opposition was mobilised. The Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army, which are backed by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as the London-based Syrian Observatory, went on a propaganda offensive.

Reports flooded the media that Syrian security forces had bombarded districts of the city of Homs. The figures on alleged casualties increased with each passing hour, first 200, then 260, then 300-plus, with reported injuries of more than 1,000. Seven Syrian embassies were attacked, including in the UK, France and Australia, in a

coordinated campaign meant to highlight what was denounced as the worst massacre yet.

Homs became the pulpit from which the US, France and Britain posed as outraged defenders of human rights.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Russia and China were complicit in atrocities perpetrated by the Assad regime. “To block this resolution is to bear the responsibility for the horrors that are occurring on the ground in Syria,” she declared.

President Barack Obama issued a statement condemning what he called “the Syrian government’s unspeakable assault against the people of Homs” and accusing Assad of having “murdered hundreds of Syrian citizens, including women and children.”

Washington’s UN envoy Susan Rice said that Russia and China aimed to “sell out the Syrian people and shield a craven tyrant.” She later wrote on Twitter, “Disgusted that Russia and China prevented the UN Security Council from fulfilling its sole purpose.”

None of the establishment media even hinted at the cynical and hypocritical character of these statements of supposed moral revulsion from officials who have praised the US intervention in Iraq, which involved atrocities such as the destruction of Fallujah that go far beyond anything committed by the Syrian regime, and who bear political responsibility for massacres, targeted assassinations and torture in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe proclaimed, “Those who block the adoption of such a resolution will bear a heavy responsibility in history... the massacre in Homs is a crime against humanity and those responsible will have to answer for it.”

The highly belligerent tone of the US, French and British denunciations of Russia and China was a noteworthy and ominous indication of mounting intrigues directed against Moscow and Beijing. The latter undoubtedly have taken note.

It is impossible at this stage to know precisely what happened in Homs. The Assad regime has denied reports of shelling, stating that the only film of casualties made available, showing eight bodies in a room, revealed no signs of mortar fire. The government claims that the corpses were of “citizens who were kidnapped and killed by armed gunmen.”

The *New York Times* in an account published Sunday that echoes the line of the Obama administration and the Syrian opposition nevertheless acknowledged that the renewed fighting in Homs was provoked by the opposition. Citing oppositional “activists,” the newspaper

reported that Syrian Army “defectors” attacked two military checkpoints Friday and abducted between 13 and 19 Syrian soldiers. This attack coincided with the negotiations in the UN Security Council on the Western-backed resolution.

But nothing could stop the media from reporting in chorus and uncritically the claims of the opposition. Only Reuters made the obvious point that “It was not immediately clear what had prompted Syrian forces to launch such an intense bombardment, just as diplomats at the Security Council were discussing the draft resolution supporting the Arab League demand for Dr. Assad to step aside.”

The BBC was alone in reporting that whereas “Early accounts of the casualties in Homs on Saturday talked of as many as 200 deaths... one of the main activist groups [the Local Coordinating Committees] later revised its confirmed toll down to 55.”

The US and France now appear set to proceed outside of the UN, forming a new version of the “coalition of the willing” that pursued the 2003 war against Iraq—with the Arab League and Turkey providing political cover.

“Faced with a neutered Security Council, we have to redouble our efforts outside of the UN with those allies and partners who support the Syrian people’s right to have a better future,” Clinton stated.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said France would work with its European and Arab partners to create what he called a “group of friends of the Syrian people.”

With Arab League foreign ministers slated to meet in Cairo next Saturday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr called for a solution in Syria “within an Arab context.”



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