

US shuts Syrian embassy, threatens war

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The US shut its Syrian embassy and Britain recalled its ambassador for consultations yesterday, amid stepped-up US and European war preparations. These moves came after Saturday's veto by Russia and China of a US-backed UN Security Council resolution against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland blamed a "deteriorating security situation" for the US decision to relocate its diplomatic staff from Syria to neighboring Jordan. However, the *New York Times* commented that Obama administration officials "believe there is nothing left to talk about with Mr. Assad."

The move effectively broke off US and British diplomatic relations with Syria, further escalating tensions as US and European officials demand Assad's ouster. These officials denounced Russia and China for their vote, and predicted a rapid spread of civil war in Syria and the collapse of the Assad regime. There is already increasingly intense fighting between the Syrian army and armed US-backed "rebel" groups inside Syria.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague told Sky TV, "This is a doomed regime as well as a murdering regime. There is no way it can get its credibility back either internationally or with its own people." He forecast that the Syrian government "is driving some opponents to violent action themselves. That is tipping Syria closer to something that begins to look like civil war."

On CBS' "This Morning" television news program, US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice threatened that the Russian and Chinese vetoes were "a decision, I think, that over time Russia and China will come to regret." She warned that the two countries could face similar international isolation as Syria itself.

Asked about Syria, Rice ritualistically claimed that the United States wanted "a very peaceful transition."

However, she then added, "we'll continue to step up the pressure on the Assad regime through all means—diplomatic, economic, and otherwise. But the risk of civil war is indeed increasing."

Rice did not say what "other" means Washington would contemplate. However, this was spelled out by Colonel Riad al-Asaad, the commander of the Turkish- and US-backed Syrian Free Army (SFA), which is mounting ongoing military operations inside Syria. Al-Asaad said, "There is no other road" except military action against Assad, adding: "This regime does not understand the language of politics. It only understands the language of force."

Claims by US and European officials that they are seeking a peaceful road to resolve the crisis in Syria are bald-faced lies. Having backed the SFA and similar pro-Western "rebel" forces in an escalating civil war inside Syria for months, they are now moving to openly support these forces and—as in last year's NATO war against Libya—try to crush the regime.

Washington's plans were spelled out on Sunday in a speech by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Sofia, Bulgaria. Demanding Assad's resignation and promising to "redouble our efforts outside of the United Nations," she said the United States would implement sanctions "to dry up the sources of funding and the arms shipments that are keeping the regime's war machine going."

She added, "We will work with the friends of a democratic Syria around the world to support the opposition's peaceful political plans for change. We will work to provide what humanitarian relief we are able to."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* remarked that such proposals suggested the upcoming "formation of a formal group of like-minded nations to co-ordinate assistance to the Syrian opposition, similar to the Contact Group on Libya, which oversaw international

help for opponents of the late deposed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.”

The “humanitarian assistance” provided by members of the group to Libyan “rebels” was widely reported to include covert arms shipments. The Libyan war ended with the bombing of Tripoli and Sirte, the extra-judicial murder of Gaddafi, and an estimated 80,000 Libyan casualties.

The United States and its allies are not only veering towards another disastrous conflict with Syria, but potentially with larger powers such as Iran and Russia. Clinton’s threat to halt weapons shipments to Syria will heighten US tensions with both countries, which have sent arms to Assad overland or via the Mediterranean Sea. Last month Russia also sent its *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier and escort vessels to cruise Syrian waters and visit the Syrian port of Tartus, which hosts a Russian naval base.

Russia and China defended their vetoes of the UN resolution yesterday. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized “evaluations of the vote on Syria in the United Nations Security Council that sound, I would say, indecent and perhaps on the verge of hysterical.”

An editorial in China’s *People’s Daily* justified China’s veto of the UN resolution by noting that NATO “abused” UN resolution 1973 against Libya last year, supplying “one side of the war with firearms. Was the promise on protecting civilians kept?”

Lavrov is traveling to Syria today along with Foreign Intelligence Service Director Mikhail Fradkov, for talks with Assad. The Russian Foreign Ministry released a statement declaring that Russia “firmly intends to seek the swiftest stabilization of the situation in Syria on the basis of the swiftest implementation of democratic reforms whose time has come.”

The US press speculated that these remarks might signal a decision by the Kremlin to acquiesce to a “controlled exit” of Assad and line up behind the US intervention.

Yesterday Washington also made a series of threatening moves against Iran. Obama signed an executive order tightening sanctions on Iran and its central bank, which oversees transactions on Iran’s critical oil exports. The order blocks any assets deemed under US control, including foreign branches of US banks, from being transferred, paid, exported, or

withdrawn to or from Iran.

Obama added that Washington would work “in lockstep” with Israel against Iran’s nuclear program. Israel has repeatedly threatened to attack Iran, and is widely presumed to be behind a wave of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists.



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