

Arming of Syria's opposition stepped up as demand for safe havens grows

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The Gulf States have now declared arming the Syrian opposition their policy, after months of doing so covertly.

Last Thursday, Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani announced that the Qatari monarchy would now "do whatever necessary to help them, including giving them weapons to defend themselves." This was followed by an announcement that Libya was making \$100 million available to the opposition, money clearly funneled from Qatar.

Qatar, together with Saudi Arabia, supplied vast quantities of weaponry to Libya's National Transitional Council, creating a force that was then used as a proxy by Washington and the NATO powers.

The new policy of open military aid was backed by Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and Kuwait's parliament. The move is aimed firstly at strengthening the Free Syrian Army, in the aftermath of the rout it suffered in its stronghold in Homs, Baba Amr. But politically the aim remains of securing full military support for the overthrow of the regime of Bashir al-Assad from Washington, Paris, and London.

The United States, France, and the UK have all declared their support for regime change. But they have been dismayed at the lack of support for the opposition in the major urban centres of Damascus and Aleppo and the limited military capabilities of the fractious and disparate opposition groupings, dominated by Sunni Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood and including al-Qaeda-type forces.

Stepping up the arming of the opposition is bound up

with efforts to secure the Syrian National Council's control of the movement and convince the major powers that the downfall of Assad will give them what they want—the isolation of Iran—without precipitating the kind of long-term instability and sectarian conflict that followed the downfall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

The SNC coordinated its announcement last Wednesday of the establishment of a new military bureau to tighten links with the FSA. The move was announced at a press conference by SNC President Burhan Ghalioun. The bureau will be "free to seek expertise and assistance as they see fit," the SNC said.

At least 20 leading SNC members had earlier formed the Syrian Patriotic Group with the stated aim of backing "the national effort to bring down the regime with all available resistance means including supporting the Free Syrian Army."

Arms have been provided to the FSA and SNC for months, including from the Western powers themselves. At last month's Friends of Syria conference in Tunisia, SNC spokesperson Bassma Kodmani said that several countries that she refused to name were supplying equipment including military communications technology, body armour and night-vision goggles to the FSA, as well as lethal weapons.

The hundreds of millions now being spoken of publicly will be used to provide heavy military equipment, with the aim of facilitating the FSA's stated intention of carving out a "safe haven" near the Turkish border that would then require military protection along the lines of similar initiatives preparatory to wars in Libya, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia.

A key role would have to be played by Turkey, which is home to both the SNC and the as yet somewhat nominal command of the FSA, led by Colonel Riad al-Asaad. Col. Assad told the *Financial Times*, “If we had anti-tank missiles, then we could impose a safe haven and take over an area.”

Turkey has again stepped up its rhetorical attacks on the Assad regime, with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu comparing Syrian events with the 1995 “situation in Srebrenica.” He spoke on Saturday alongside Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi. The killing of Bosnian Muslims by Serbia was later designated as an act of genocide. Davutoglu called on the international community to take measures, including providing military assistance to opposition forces.

Turkey has indicated on a number of occasions that it would be willing to spearhead a military campaign against Syria, but it wants the official backing of NATO before doing so—something NATO has so far failed to offer.

The chivvying between the regional powers and the imperialists is understandable, given the high stakes for which they are playing. Regime change in Syria is seen as a stepping stone towards eliminating Iran as a regional opponent and in the process cutting Russia’s and China’s access to the oil riches of the region. Despite their reservations and a required degree of caution and dissembling, the major powers are heavily involved in the campaign to destabilize Assad’s Baathist regime.

On Friday, President Nicolas Sarkozy called for the establishment of a humanitarian zone near the Syrian border along the lines of that sought by the FSA and SNC, at the same time as he shut France’s Syrian embassy. “We will do nothing without a U.N. Security Council resolution,” he claimed, which would establish “legal conditions for a humanitarian zone, for arms delivery for the opposition or for corridors.”

Legally or not, France clearly desires all three objectives—a buffer zone, humanitarian corridors and the arming of the opposition—and is working towards that end.

Significantly, on Monday Lebanon’s *Daily*

Star reported, “Around 13 French officers are being held by Syrian authorities... in custody in the central city of Homs”. Britain’s Daily Telegraph cited an official denial by the French foreign ministry, but added that “the defence ministry was less categorical, saying it neither confirmed nor denied the claim.”

Every possible means is being employed to encourage Moscow and Beijing to take their distance from Assad and to end their opposition to a UN Security Council resolution paving the way for war on the grounds of a “responsibility to protect”. Both have reiterated their opposition to military intervention. Nevertheless, the pro-war media could not conceal its delight when Vladimir Putin stated Friday that “We have no special relationship with Syria.”

His comments came as Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said that Russia will not provide military assistance to Syria if it came under foreign attack--as is required under treaty obligations dating back to the existence of the Soviet Union.

Russia and China have also signed on to a Security Council statement calling for Syria to allow United Nations humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator Baroness Valerie Amos into the country and for “full and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel to all populations in need of assistance.”

In a move that is deeply embarrassing for the Gulf States and other Arab sponsors of the Syrian opposition, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman told Army Radio that Israel is “ready to supply any humanitarian aid necessary” via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He did so while citing Syria as proof that Israel could not rely on anyone else to protect it from Iran and that, when it comes to a military attack on Tehran, the Israeli government “will take the decisions that are most appropriate based on its evaluation of the situation.”



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