

# NATO discusses military intervention in Syria

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Turkey is leading calls for a military attack on Syria on behalf of the United States. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu attended yesterday's NATO meeting in Brussels and will attend the Paris meeting today of the Friends of Syria—the Washington-led front, encompassing the European powers and Arab League states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, that is leading the war drive against Syria. Also in attendance along with Davutoglu will be Turkish Defence Minister Ismet Yilmaz.

Behind the smokescreen of the United Nations and Kofi Annan's ceasefire, plans are being finalised for intervention, including US involvement under the auspices of NATO. Turkey had said it would raise the issue of an alleged violation of its Syrian border at the NATO ministerial meeting and call for NATO to come to its "defence."

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will attend today's Friends of Syria meeting and will, according to French diplomatic sources, discuss the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The two meetings are in preparation for the NATO Heads of State and Government Summit in Chicago on May 20-21.

Turkey is acting as a base of operations for the Free Syrian Army's military attacks in Syria. The FSA is a sectarian Sunni force armed by the US, Britain and France. It includes covert troops supplied by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Libya.

Turkey is also home to the opposition Syrian National Council, a front made up of Islamists, CIA assets and ex-regime elements. It functions as a political proxy for Washington.

Ankara is using a border incident on April 9 in which Syrian forces are accused of wounding four Syrians and two Turkish staff working at a refugee camp to urge a military response by NATO. The Syrian regime claims that its forces had come under fire from Turkish

territory. The incident is the only case to date of Syrian fire allegedly hitting people on Turkish soil.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan responded to the incident last week by insisting, "A country has rights born out of international law against border violations. ... NATO has responsibilities to do with Turkey's borders, according to Article 5."

Article 5 of the NATO treaty declares that an armed attack against a NATO member is tantamount to an attack against all members and can be met with armed force. Invoking Article 5 would allow NATO members to take military action against Syria without a UN Security Council resolution, bypassing the objections to armed intervention of Russia and China.

To date it has been invoked only once—following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States which became the pretext for the nearly 11-year-long war against Afghanistan.

Turkish officials have repeatedly denounced Syria for not abiding by the terms of the UN ceasefire, blaming Assad personally for violations. "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is trying to buy time. It is the reason why Turkey does not believe in a ceasefire in the country", Erdogan said.

The Turkish prime minister held extensive discussions with President Barack Obama and CIA Director David Petraeus at the beginning of this month. He told reporters that studies were "underway" on a creating a buffer zone on Syrian territory and that "The 'right to protection' may be put into use, according to international rules."

Making use of a minor border clash to declare war would be difficult, but the incident could be cited to legitimise the setting up of a buffer zone by Turkey's military on Syrian soil. The need to defend such a bridgehead would provide an excuse for deploying NATO air power.

Turkish media reports have cited specifics regarding

the preparations for a buffer zone, with 500 military personnel involved in inspecting areas close to the border as sites for a possible 20 kilometre (12.5 mile) incursion into Syria.

There have been numerous reports of the involvement on the ground of US Special Forces and troops in the planned operation, including the reassignment of troops previously stationed in Iraq. There are also reports of Saudi Arabia and Qatar training thousands of fighters in a closed-off location to boost the numbers of the FSA. The Obama administration has publicly agreed to a \$12 million donation to the FSA.

A Captain Amar Wawi told CNN this week that the FSA is gathering more weapons and “preparing ourselves for the next stage if the Annan mission fails”. A Lieutenant Abdullah Oda said he was in Iraq last week brokering a deal to send weapons, including anti-tank missiles, “which we need strategically on the ground against tanks and against armour.”

In a significant political shift, the Syrian National Coordination Board (NCB), or National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change, has come out in favour of armed intervention by the Western powers for the first time. The alliance of nominally leftist and nationalist parties previously opposed the SNC on this question. A spokesman told RIA Novosti that if the UN peace plan failed, the NCB would first call for a UN Security Council resolution to allow for “humanitarian intervention” in Syria.

Washington has repeatedly dismissed the ceasefire as a fraud and continues to push for action. US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice said the Assad regime had “lied to the international community, lied to their own people”. She continued, “And the biggest fabricator of the facts is Assad himself. ... His representatives are merely doing his bidding and under probably some not insignificant personal duress.”

Targeting Assad personally in this way is an attempt to encourage defectors at the top, through which the US can secure its aim of regime-change. A UN commission of inquiry on Syria issued a report February 23 accusing Syrian forces of crimes against humanity, including murder, abductions and torture carried out under orders from the “highest level” of army and government officials. A secret list of suspects was handed over to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, who urged action by the

International Criminal Court (ICC).

Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani used a visit to Rome to declare that the Syrian people should not be supported through peaceful means, but “with arms”. Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti stressed the “close collaboration” between Rome and Doha on Syria.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated bluntly, “There are those who want Kofi Annan's plan to fail. ... They are doing this by delivering arms to the Syrian opposition and stimulating the activity of rebels, who continue to attack both government facilities and ... civilian facilities on a daily basis.”

He called for the Syrian opposition to be pressured to comply with Annan’s plan. Instead, he said, “There are countries, there are external forces, that are ... encouraging the Syrian opposition not to cooperate with the government in providing for a ceasefire and the subsequent establishment of dialogue.”

French diplomats boasted this week that Western sanctions on Syria are bleeding the country dry. A spokesman said, “We haven’t got a perfect measurement instrument to tell us when the regime will no longer be able to function, but we are seeing an extremely strong decline in foreign reserves: About half.”

“With the deteriorating economy there is a hyperinflationary context, sharp collapse of the currency and a fall in revenues. That pressure will eventually be felt”, said another source.

The European Union is set to impose a new round of sanctions after talks in Paris.



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