

US threatens military intervention in Syria following Houla massacre

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The massacre of over 100 people in Houla is being utilized by the United States, other Western powers and the Gulf States to step up their drive for regime-change in Syria. Thirty-two children and 34 women were among Friday's dead, the United Nations has said.

Speaking yesterday to Fox News, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey said, "Of course, there is always a military option... it may come to a point with Syria because of the atrocities."

His comments follow a series of bellicose statements by Washington. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "The US will work with the international community to intensify our pressure on [Syrian President Bashar] Assad and his cronies, whose rule by murder and fear must come to an end." The White House called the Houla attack "a vile testament to an illegitimate regime."

The Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is also once again urging direct military intervention. Kuwait, which currently heads the Arab League, announced it is calling for a ministerial meeting to "take steps to put an end to the oppressive practices against the Syrian people."

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), based in Turkey and funded and organized by Washington and its allies, declared it was no longer committed to the truce brokered by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. It issued a statement saying that "unless the UN Security Council takes urgent steps for the protection of civilians, Annan's plan is going to go to hell."

The Western-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) has called on the UN Security Council to convene an emergency meeting and take binding decisions to "protect the Syrian people" by invoking Chapter VII, which sanctions the use of force.

The Obama administration has to date confined its efforts to destabilize the Assad regime to covert support for proxy Sunni-based forces such as the FSA and SNC. But it is seeking to capitalise on the tragic events in Houla to secure the necessary political backing for direct intervention. This means either enlisting Russia's support or neutralizing Moscow's opposition to any move to depose Assad.

On Sunday, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a nonbinding statement condemning the killings in Houla "in attacks that involved a series of government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood." The statement went on to condemn "the killing of civilians by shooting at close range and by severe physical abuse."

Clear differences remain, however. Moscow fears that regime-change would deprive it of its main base in the Middle East and secure undisputed US hegemony over the region's oil riches by surrounding Shia Iran with a ring of pro-Washington Sunni regimes.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking yesterday at a news conference with UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, said he wanted Damascus to resolve its problems "without foreign interference."

He continued: "Both sides have obviously had a hand in the deaths of innocent people, including several dozen women and children. This area is controlled by the rebels, but it is also surrounded by government troops." There was no doubt that government forces had used artillery and tanks to shell Houla, he said, but many of the dead appeared to have been shot at close range or tortured.

Assad's government "bears the main responsibility for what is going on," he added, but it was facing terrorists whose bombings have the "clear signature of Al Qaeda."

Publicly, the Obama administration is focusing its efforts on securing Russian support for a phased departure of Assad, modeled on the transition of power in Yemen. Republican Senator John McCain denounced Obama for embracing a “feckless” foreign policy in negotiating with Russia, while Obama’s Republican opponent in the presidential election, Mitt Romney, insisted that the US “should work with partners to organize and arm Syrian opposition groups so they can defend themselves.”

Obama has been reluctant to wage the type of direct NATO-led offensive carried out last year in Libya. But his Republican critics only state openly what the White House is already doing covertly in what may soon become a full-scale proxy war waged by Turkey and the Gulf regimes on America’s behalf.

Nothing that is said by the major powers or the mass media on Houla and the civil war in Syria can be taken at face value. Houla is being lined up to serve the same political function as atrocities in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere in providing a justification for imperialist intervention.

First, there is as of yet no full account of the events themselves, which remain in dispute.

Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi said that the fighting began after “hundreds of heavily-armed gunmen carrying machine guns, mortars and anti-tank missiles” launched an attack on five Syrian army positions that continued for nine hours. Five army positions in the area came under attack, leaving three soldiers dead and 16 wounded, he said. Blaming terrorists for the deaths that followed, he said that during the conflict, “Children, women and other innocent people were killed in their homes, and this is not what the Syrian army does. The method of killing was brutal.”

Opposition activists have admitted clashes between the army and the insurgency, but blame the deaths on pro-regime “shabiha” militia.

The head of the UN observer mission in Syria, Major-General Robert Mood, issued a report stating that “artillery and tank shells were fired at a residential neighbourhood,” while acknowledging that close-range shotgun wounds, stabbings and “severe physical abuse” were the main causes of death.

Mood has been quoted as saying, “Whatever I learned on the ground in Syria...is that I should not jump to

conclusions.”

It should also be recalled that the media and Western politicians responded to previous atrocities, like the May 10 car bombs in Damascus that killed 55 people, with far less outrage and far greater caution when it came to apportioning blame. At the time, they concurred that this and similar terror attacks should not be presumed to be the work of Al Qaeda and uncritically cited opposition charges that they were provocations by the Assad regime. Yet, on May 18, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon declared publicly to little media comment, “I believe that there must be Al Qaeda behind it. This has created again very serious problems.”

The US and its European and Middle-Eastern allies are as wholly indifferent to what really happened in Houla as they are to the more general suffering of the Syrian masses. As British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant declared, “So, it does not matter, to be honest, what the exact circumstances in the run-up to this atrocity were. The fact is that it is an atrocity, and it was perpetrated by the Syrian government.”

Ultimate responsibility for Houla rests with Washington and its allies, who have fostered and armed a sectarian Sunni insurgency dedicated to the overthrow of the Assad regime and its replacement by a government entirely subordinated to a strategic Middle East alliance dominated by the US.

The only legitimate response to the Houla massacre is to redouble the demand for Washington and its accomplices to end their intrigues and subversion against Syria. It is up to the Syrian workers and peasant masses to determine their own future and to make a political reckoning with both the bourgeois Assad regime and the bourgeois and sectarian forces that presently dominate the opposition, thanks to their international sponsors.



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