Syria prepares for possible invasion

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Syria is conducting military manoeuvres simulating an invasion, in response to escalating threats from Washington and its regional allies.

The large-scale exercise, which began Saturday, is based upon a response to external aggression and includes both air and ground forces and the firing of live missiles.

Defence Minister Dawood Rajiha said naval forces had showed "a high level of combat training and ability to defend Syria's shores against any possible aggression."

Turkey has repeatedly scrambled fighter aircraft and moved additional troops to the border following Syria's downing of a Phantom-4 reconnaissance jet on June 22. Border incursions by the Free Syrian Army based in Turkey are becoming ever-more frequent, and fighting is now frequent along the border with Lebanon.

Syria's news agency SANA said the country's troops had foiled infiltration attempts by armed men from Turkey and Lebanon on Friday, with one clash resulting "in the killing, injury of dozens of the infiltrated gunmen."

In Idlib province, an armed group was prevented from infiltrating from Turkey in the Harem region, SANA added, leading to a number of deaths.

On Saturday, mortar fire from Syria reportedly hit Lebanese villages in the north, with a disputed number of casualties. North Lebanon is an established base for forces opposing the government of Bashar al-Assad and the country is rapidly polarising into two camps echoing divisions in Syria itself.

Armed Sunni militias in Lebanon are being cultivated and supplied by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey directed against both Assad in Syria AND Prime Minister Najib Mikati's Hezbollah-backed government which is allied with Iran and Syria.

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri denounced the Mikati government for its silence on the weekend's killings, stating that it "was appointed to facilitate such crimes to begin with."

The head of the Future Movement Parliamentary bloc, Fouad Siniora, called the government "complicit with whoever is committing crimes and assassinations... the path is open for a salvation government before it's too late."

On Friday, Paris hosted a Friends of Syria meeting that was boycotted once again by Russia and China.

The previous weekend, a meeting in Geneva had agreed a transition plan for Syria, which avoided the issue of demanding Assad's departure being a precondition for a transitional government. Moscow and Beijing both oppose this demand, which is insisted upon by Washington.

The US and its allies made statements claiming that Russia had accepted the need for Assad's departure—beginning a heated diplomatic row that boiled over in Paris.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said afterwards that some Western countries had asked Moscow to offer Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a haven in exile, with the proposal first being mooted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel during June 1 talks with President Vladimir Putin.

"Our side thought this was a joke and responded with a joke—how about you, the Germans, take Mr Assad instead," Lavrov said at a press appearance with German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle.

He was "quite surprised" when the idea was raised again during the meeting in Geneva.

In Paris, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton urged participants to make Russia and China "pay a price" for helping Assad.

"I ask you to reach out to Russia and China, and to not only urge but demand that they get off the sidelines and begin to support the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people," she said. "I don't think Russia and China believe they are paying any price at all, nothing at all, for standing up on behalf of the Assad regime. The only way that will change is if every nation

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represented here directly and urgently makes it clear that Russia and China will pay a price."

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani called for the UN Security Council to be bypassed. "We are ready to take part in any effort of any kind to free the Syrian people of this tragedy they are in," he said.

On Saturday, Special UN envoy Kofi Annan gave an interview with *Le Monde* in which he said that efforts to find a political solution to the escalating violence in Syria had failed. His remarks were embraced by Clinton as an occasion for stepping up her attacks. Speaking in Japan, she said Annan's acknowledgement that his peace plan is failing "should be a wake-up call for everyone."

"The days are numbered" for Assad, she said. "The sooner there can be an end to the violence and a beginning of a political transition process, not only will fewer people die, but there's a chance to save the Syrian state from a catastrophic assault that would be very dangerous not only to Syria but to the region."

Though all news sources made pains to assert that a "catastrophic assault" related to attacks by the opposition, the underlying threat is clear.

Annan's interview in fact expressed a degree of frustration and anger on his part at the direct military interference in Syria already being conducted by the US and its Turkish and Gulf State allies. He complained that while Russia and Iran were mentioned by some as stumbling blocks to peace, "little is said about other countries which send arms, money, and have a presence on the ground."

"All of these countries say they want a peaceful solution, but they undertake individual and collective actions that undermine the very meaning of Security Council resolutions," he said.

He called this a "destructive competition".

On July 3, a collective meeting of Syria's opposition in Cairo gave an insight into the type of regime the Western powers are seeking to replace Assad's Baathists.

As with Libya before it, the opposition is touted as a democratic force, but is in reality dominated by Islamists, former regime elements and Western intelligence assets. Cairo too was dominated by efforts to project such an image, with official reports focusing on policy statements, pledging that a post-Assad Syria would have a "republican, democratic, civilian, pluralistic" system of government.

However, the 250-strong conference was a fractious affair due to deep differences over support for imperialist military intervention, the undemocratic nature of the leading pro-Western front, the Syrian national Council, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and the refusal to make concessions to Syria's Kurdish population.

A prominent tribal leader from Homs, Abdel-Ilah al-Mulham, insisted that Syria must become an Islamist state. "The revolution came out of the mosques, so with my respect to minorities, we want a civil state but we must also remember that more than 80 percent of Syria is Muslim," he said. He opposed laws that made men and women equal as counter to Islamic law.

The SNC was opposed in its role as the imperialist-appointed leadership of the opposition, in part because it is made up of exiles with no actual base in Syria and in part because of its political coloration.

The SNC was accused by the Syrian National Coordination Body of being a front for the Muslim Brotherhood, while the SNC denounced the NCB as too close to the regime for opposing its majority military intervention.

Kurdish activists staged a walkout because Kurds were not recognised as a distinct minority. Fighting broke out and punches were thrown.

Morshed Mashouk, a leading member of the Syrian Kurdish National Council, declared, "We will not return to the conference and that is our final line. We are a people as we have language and religion and that is what defines a people."

The Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), a disparate group of 44 "revolution blocks" with a base in Syria, pulled out before the meeting was convened.

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