

# “Friends of Syria” meeting demands Assad cede power to Islamist opposition

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Representatives of 130 governments, led by Washington and its European and Arab allies, attended a “Friends of Syria” meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco yesterday. Moroccan Foreign Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani said they had agreed to declare the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces the sole representative of the Syrian people.

The meeting came the day after US President Barack Obama officially recognized the National Coalition. The Islamist-dominated coalition was organized by the US State Department to represent the armed opposition groups fighting a NATO-backed proxy war against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

A draft declaration circulated at the Marrakesh meeting stated, “Participants acknowledge the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and the umbrella organization under which the Syrian opposition are gathering ... Bashar al-Assad has lost legitimacy and should stand aside to allow a sustainable political transition.”

Countries that still support Assad, including Russia, China, and Iran, did not attend the meeting in Marrakech. Speaking of the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “The United States has decided to place all its bets on an armed victory of the National Coalition.”

The meeting highlighted the criminal and reactionary character of the NATO proxy war against Syria, in which the US’ Arab allies arm Al Qaeda-linked forces in a terrorist campaign with devastating consequences for Syrian civilians.

Syrian Muslim Brotherhood deputy leader Farouq Tayfour set the tone, suggesting that National Coalition forces would extra-judicially murder Assad. He compared Assad’s fate to that of Libyan head of state Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi, whose government was

overthrown last year in a NATO war. Gaddafi was ultimately tortured and lynched by US-backed guerrillas after his convoy was bombed by NATO warplanes as he fled his hometown of Sirte.

Tayfour said: “Bashar is under siege. His end will be like Gaddafi’s end. Didn’t Bashar say, ‘I was born in Syria and I will die in Syria’? That is what Gaddafi said as well, and that’s it.”

Washington’s Islamist proxies criticized the State Department’s decision announced on Tuesday to designate the Al Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate inside the Syrian opposition, as a terrorist group. The State Department Spokeswoman charged the Al Nusra Front with having carried out nearly 600 attacks over the last year in Syria, in which “numerous innocent Syrians have been killed.”

National Coalition chief Moaz al-Khatib asked Washington to “re-examine” its designation of the Al Nusra Front as a terrorist group. He said, “We can have ideological and political differences with certain parties, but the revolutionaries all share the same goal: to overthrow Assad’s criminal regime.”

Muslim Brotherhood officials told AFP that Washington’s designation of the Al Nusra Front as a terrorist group was “wrong,” and that “Assad is the only terrorist in Syria.”

This is apparently because large sections of the NATO-backed Syrian opposition are nearly indistinguishable from Al Qaeda. The *New York Times* wrote, “Some groups in the Free Syrian Army have similar ideologies, follow the strict Salafist interpretation of Islam, and count among them fighters who joined the insurgency in Iraq—though they are not known to share the Al Nusra Front’s direct organizational connections to Al Qaeda in Iraq.”

Anti-Assad opposition groups in Syria have

reportedly called for Friday protests against the US blacklisting of the Al Nusra Front, under the slogan, “No to American intervention—we are all the Al Nusra Front.”

Despite widespread reports of ties between the Syrian opposition and Al Qaeda, the imperialist powers are accelerating plans to intervene to back the Syrian opposition.

British army officials are reportedly planning operations to give naval and air support to the Syrian opposition, help take over “safe corridors”—that is, opposition-controlled areas—inside Syria, or to directly provide “logistical help” to the opposition. They reportedly met with French, Turkish, Jordanian, Qatari, Emirati, and American military officials in London for planning purposes, at British Prime Minister David Cameron’s request.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said that his government, which was the first to recognize the Syrian opposition, would wait before arming them: “For now, we have decided not to move on this. We shall see in the coming months.”

A deafening silence still prevails in the media and political establishment over the Orwellian cynicism of NATO’s backing of Al Qaeda forces against Assad. Over a decade has passed since Washington claimed it had launched a “war on terror” against Al Qaeda, using it to justify deep attacks on democratic rights and the launching of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond. After constant NATO dismissals of the Assad regime’s reports of terrorist atrocities by Syrian opposition forces, it emerges that Al Qaeda is an integral part of the NATO-backed opposition.

This exposes the fact that the Syrian opposition itself is not a broad revolutionary upsurge of the Syrian people against Assad, but a right-wing minority functioning as a tool of imperialist policy of the NATO countries. This policy is worked out with utter contempt for public opinion in these countries, whose governments function as cabals answerable only to the financial elite and the top echelons of the state.

Reports of an escalating social crisis in Syria itself underscored the devastating impact of war on the Syrian population. Over 40,000 people have reportedly been killed, and half a million turned into refugees.

A Syrian student in Aleppo told *Le Nouvel Observateur* that thousands of people there risk

starvation. He explained, “The staple food here is bread, which is made in industrial bakeries financed by the state. Before the crisis it was sold for 35 pounds [US\$0.49], but now it sells for 200-250 pounds if one manages to find it at all. Such inflation prevents people from buying very much of it, and now many people face famine.”

He blamed this situation on the rebels: “The city’s grain silos were pillaged by the rebels, who sold their contents to finance arms purchases.”

The United Nations’ IRIN news service reported on the war’s catastrophic impact on Syria’s health care. Half of Syria’s 88 public hospitals have been damaged by the fighting, and 23 no longer function at all. There are desperate shortages of insulin, blood pressure drugs, and other medicines.

IRIN wrote, “Pharmaceutical factories, which used to produce more than 90 percent of the country’s drug needs, are down to one third of their former production, according to Elizabeth Hoff, the representative of the World Health Organization. Many have been destroyed or damaged in the fighting—sometimes directly targeted by the opposition. The northern city of Aleppo, one of the worst affected by the conflict, was home to most of the factories. Other factories are struggling to import raw materials, due to sanctions imposed on Syria by Western countries.”

Mohammed Zein, a 64-year-old vegetable vendor in Aleppo, told *Al Jazeera*: “Our country is being destroyed. If this is revolution, I don’t want it. I have to stress that I am not a supporter of the regime, because they used to oppress us. But now, we are being oppressed 100 times more.”



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