

Push for Western military intervention in Syria escalates

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Speaking at a Holocaust memorial in New York on Saturday, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stepped up the vilification of the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad by comparing the death toll in the country's civil war to the Nazi genocide of Jews during World War II. Ban's comments are another sign that the major powers are preparing for direct intervention in Syria.

Ban specifically invoked the UN's fraudulent "responsibility to protect" that provides the pretext for the US and its allies to violate national sovereignty to "protect" the local population. "The responsibility to protect applies everywhere and all the time," he declared. "It has been implemented with success in a number of places, including in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire. But today it faces a great test in Syria."

The reference to Libya is significant. It provides a model for the operations being considered against the Assad regime—the imposition of a "no-fly" zone and relentless aerial bombardment to complement the arming of militias on the ground. Ban's remarks coincide with the deployment of Patriot missile batteries and the stationing of 1,200 NATO troops on the Syria-Turkey border, a necessary prelude to any air war. Thousands more troops are stationed in neighbouring countries.

The propaganda war was also intensified by a draft letter signed by more 50 countries calling for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court. As reported by the Associated Press on Saturday, France and Britain are the most prominent signatories. Apart from further demonising the Syrian regime, the move is designed to intensify pressure on Assad to go.

There are a number of indications that the US and its allies are preparing for direct intervention in Syria.

According to a CNN report, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta countenanced the possibility of sending US troops to Syria, on the pretext of securing chemical weapons, once a "transition" from the Assad regime had begun. "We're not talking about ground troops, but it depends on what... happens in a transition," Panetta said last Thursday.

Speaking in the British parliament on the same day, Foreign Secretary William Hague again called for the scrapping of a European Union embargo on providing arms to anti-Assad militias in Syria when the embargo comes up for review on March 1. He went further, however, declaring that "we should send strong signals to Assad that all options are on the table"—that is, including military intervention.

Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, was even more blunt on Saturday. He called for a deadline for diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Syria of "three or four weeks, but no more." Hamad again insisted that any "political solution" to the conflict required Assad's removal.

Talks in Geneva last Friday between US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, mediated by UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, resulted in no agreement. On Saturday, Russia reaffirmed its opposition to calls for the removal of Assad as a precondition for a "political transition in Syria."

The Russian defence ministry announced on Friday that it would hold major naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean, involving anti-ship, anti-submarine, and air defence operations. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly described the naval exercises as "the biggest in the history of our country." Russia operates a naval maintenance base in Syria at the port of Tartus. The US and its allies already have warships

in the same area.

The danger of the Syrian civil war sparking broader conflict has prompted concern in British ruling circles. Responding to Hague's comments, Liberal Democrat MP Menzies Campbell warned: "There is a risk that we will have a proxy war between Russia and NATO fought out on the streets of Syria by Syrians."

Anti-Assad forces appear to be targeting infrastructure outside the main cities. On Friday, opposition fighters claimed to have seized control of Taftanaz, a major helicopter base in the northern province of Idlib. The base has been the scene of heavy fighting for months. The opposition victory was reportedly due, in large part, to the arrival of Islamist reinforcements at the beginning of the year, including members of the Al-Nusra Front, which has links to Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Largely as a public relations move, Washington branded the Al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organisation in December, but is well aware that its Syrian proxies continue to collaborate closely with, and rely militarily on, the Islamists. A *Washington Post* article raised concerns not over the role of the Al-Nusra Front as a fighting force in assisting the US to oust Assad, but its role if and when he is forced out.

Entitled, "Worries About a 'Failed State' in Syria," the article explains that an intelligence report provided by Syrian sources to the US State Department referred to the situation in Aleppo, where "disorganised fighters, greedy arms peddlers and profiteering warlords" were facilitating the growing influence of the Islamists.

The report provided a bleak picture of the pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Aleppo: "The FSA has [been] transformed into disorganised rebel groups, infiltrated by large numbers of criminals. All our efforts with MCs [military councils] were abolished... Warlords are a reality on the ground now... A [failed] state is the most likely outcome of the current condition, unless adjustment [is] done."

Washington Post writer David Ignatius warned that the "dangers of US passivity" could lead to a situation akin to Libya. He urged the Obama administration to support "moderate military forces" to assist "a stable transition." In reality, the concern is to establish a pliable pro-US regime, based on "moderates," to safeguard American economic and strategic interests in

Syria, as in Libya. That has been Washington's aim from the outset.

The conditions in Libya, more than a year after its so-called liberation, are a devastating indictment of Ban Ki-Moon's promotion of intervention of the major powers under "the responsibility to protect." A pro-Western regime sits atop a country divided up between rival regional and tribal militias, each vying for a slice of political power and oil profits, even as the majority of the population confronts mass unemployment and abject poverty. Now the same is being prepared for Syria.



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