

Imperialist powers increase threats against Syria

By Niall Green
13 September 2011

The same imperialist powers that have just imposed regime change on Libya through a six-month NATO bombing campaign, using the foreign special forces-led “rebels” of the National Transitional Council as a proxy army, are now setting their sights on Syria, hoping that they can employ a similar strategy there.

The Syrian Revolution General Commission, an umbrella group of opposition organizations, issued the call for Western military backing to aid their efforts against the Assad regime.

Large protests were held in cities across Syria on Friday under the banner, “Friday for International Protection.” Especially in centers of anti-Assad protest such as Homs, Hama, Deir al-Zor and Qamishli, crowds called for foreign intervention to limit the ability of the government of President Bashar Assad to continue its brutal crackdown against demonstrators.

Some protesters called for international peacekeepers to be sent to Syria in a monitoring role, while many chanted, “We want international protection” or carried signs calling for the United Nations to send an observation mission.

The mass protests in Syria have until recently expressed hostility to foreign military intervention. Inspired by the revolutionary efforts of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt, and motivated by opposition to the dictatorial rule of President Assad and the thin layer of wealthy Syrian officials and businessmen that dominate the country, Syrian workers took to the streets in January to demand political and social rights.

Protesters said Syrian security forces broke up Friday’s demonstrations with tear gas and live ammunition. There are no independent reports on the number of casualties resulting from the unrest in Syria, which began over eight months ago, due to the government’s ban on reporting by foreign or independent journalists. Syrian human rights groups, often based in the West or financed by foreign powers, have put the number killed in anti-Assad demonstrations at over 3,000. The Syrian government has estimated the number killed at 1,400, including 700 members of the security forces.

There are also reports from Syrian opposition groups that around 30,000 people have been arrested in the regime’s crackdown. US-based Human Rights Watch has said it has evidence that Syrian security forces are targeting hospitals treating those wounded in protests, beating and kidnapping patients and intimidating medical staff.

The Syrian government claimed last week that the army had seized a store of explosives, including grenades, from what it

described as “armed terrorist groups” in the al-Ramel and Jablah areas. The state-run news agency, SANA, also reported that armed men attacked a bus carrying military personnel in the city of Homs, a center of opposition to the Assad regime, killing the driver.

SANA reported that Syrian customs officers discovered an illegal shipment of gold coming into Syria from Lebanon. Caches of weaponry have already been intercepted coming into Syria, sent by Saudi-backed groups in Lebanon to anti-Assad fighters.

Damascus is continuing to hold “National Dialogue” sessions around the country. Boycotted by most opposition groups, the so-called dialogue is an attempt by the government to maintain its dictatorial rule by offering limited, vague concessions. The regime has refused to hold talks with any armed opposition groups, but has proposed multi-party parliamentary elections for February 2012.

While it remains uncertain how much support the calls for “international protection” resonate with the Syrian masses in the absence of an international socialist perspective against Assad’s capitalist dictatorship, the appeal by the Syrian bourgeois opposition to the imperialist powers chimes perfectly with the increasingly bellicose language used by the governments of France, Britain and the United States against the regime in Damascus.

France’s foreign minister, Alain Juppe, issued the most vehement demand yet by the French government for Russia and China to accede to Western efforts to craft a UN resolution against Syria. Speaking to the press during a trip to Australia on Sunday, Juppe said the fact that the UN Security Council had not condemned Damascus was a “scandal,” and that talks between French and Russian officials had failed to reach an agreement on what language could be used against Syria.

“We think the regime has lost legitimacy,” Juppe said of the Syrian government. “It’s too late to implement a program of reform.” The French foreign minister’s remarks, essentially calling for regime change in Syria, repeated the language used last month by US President Barack Obama, who proclaimed that Assad had “lost all credibility” and could “no longer claim to lead the country.”

Joining the chorus, Tony Blair, Britain’s former prime minister, declared in an interview with the *Times* newspaper September 8 that Assad was “not capable of reform” and that, “There is no process of change that leaves him intact.”

The current Middle East peace envoy of the “Quartet”—comprised of the UN, the EU, Russia and the US—Blair threw more fuel onto the fire of regional tensions by declaring that “Regime-change in Tehran” would make him “significantly more optimistic” about the future of the Middle East.

The most naked expression of the interests of US and European imperialism in Syria, as throughout the Middle East and North Africa, was published by the *Huffington Post* September 8. The online newspaper, one of the leading liberal organs in the US, carried a posting by John Kiriakou, a former CIA officer, who bemoaned the fact that “The West’s reaction so far is decidedly weaker than it was with the Libyan uprising.”

What is needed, claims Kiriakou, is a military coup in Damascus. “Frankly, Syria’s future probably rests on the shoulders of one as-yet-anonymous general, rather than on the demonstrators taking to the streets every day.”

“Nobody wants a weak and unpredictable Syria,” the ex-CIA officer states. Only a military coup comprised of figures “likely to garner international support and recognition” could form a government capable of improving “strained relations with the Gulf States,” cooperating with Israel and isolating Iran and Hezbollah.

There is evidence that a military coup has already been prepared. The *Al-Watan* newspaper reported that a lieutenant colonel in the Syrian army, Hussein Harmoush, was arrested by the Syrian regime on Sunday, accused of forming a “free officers brigade.” The Kuwait-based Arab-language paper quoted one Syrian official saying Harmoush had made regular trips between Turkey and Syria. Syrian authorities have not officially confirmed the arrest.

Turkey, Syria’s northern neighbor, warned over a month ago that Assad must end the unrest in the country. Ankara is deeply concerned that the instability in Syria could inflame tensions with its Kurdish population, which lives in the border region near Syria, Iraq and Iran. The Turkish armed forces have in recent weeks waged an air and artillery conflict across the border into Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region, directed against Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) militants. Ankara also accuses the PKK of operating and recruiting inside Syria.

Turkey, which has sponsored Syrian opposition groups for years, is a member of NATO and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reportedly held talks with Obama over the possibility of military intervention into Syria.

These threats against Syria—and its main regional ally, Iran—by the major imperialist countries have been opposed by Russia and other powers, such as China, which fear the loss of valuable economic interests and geopolitical influence as a result of yet another Western neo-colonial war in the Middle East.

Russia—together with China, India, South Africa and Brazil—has refused to endorse the harshly worded UN condemnation of the Syrian regime. Moscow and Beijing have large-scale investments in Syria, and have long viewed the regime in Damascus as friendly to their interests in the Middle East. China exported an estimated \$1.2 billion of goods to Syria last year, and Chinese firms have around \$1 billion worth of inward investment and construction contracts in the country. Russian exports to Syria were \$1.1 billion last year, with \$4 billion in arms contracts signed with the Assad government. Syria also hosts the only Russian air force base in the

Mediterranean.

Both Russia and China have lost billions of dollars worth of investment, construction and weapons contracts following the NATO-orchestrated change of regime in Libya, and both powers are fearful that Washington, Paris and London will attempt to supplant them in Syria as well.

Moscow has condemned the latest EU and US sanctions against Damascus, which Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed would “destroy” a “partnership approach” to the Syrian crisis.

In an interview with Euronews television last week, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said that his government would oppose harsher condemnations of Syria by the Security Council. “We are ready to support different approaches,” Medvedev stated, “But they must not be based on one-sided condemnations of the actions of the government and President Assad.”

Bouthaina Shaaban, an advisor to the Syrian president, arrived in Moscow Monday for talks with the Russian government, which has so far issued only very mild criticism of the Syrian regime. Shaaban, one of those targeted by the new Western sanctions against Syria, condemned foreign influence in the Syrian conflict and stated the regime’s appreciation for “Russia’s balanced stance.”

However, the Kremlin also played host to Syrian opposition activists last week, in a clear effort to maintain Russian influence in Syria in the event that Assad should be removed from power.

The Syrian oppositionists visiting Moscow warned that the Russian government should do more to support protesters in the country. “The incomprehensible and contradictory position of the Russian leadership on what is happening in Syria could hurt Russia’s image in the future,” opposition leader Ammar al-Qurabi told a press conference in Moscow.

Al-Qurabi, who also attended a Syrian opposition conference sponsored by the Turkish government earlier this year, threatened that Moscow risked being frozen out of any future carve-up of Syria’s resources. “We do not want Russia to repeat the mistake it made in Libya. It recognized the transitional council too late. The same thing happened with Iraq, and we don’t want Russia to repeat it for a third time,” he told Russian media on Friday.

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