

Turkey preparing military intervention in Syria

By Jean Shaoul
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Turkey is playing a major role in preparing a military push on NATO's behalf into Syria, exploiting and militarising the ongoing popular protests against the repressive Assad regime in order to install an imperialist-backed puppet regime.

The unrest in Syria, now in its seventh month, has been largely led by Islamist forces sponsored by the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia. Turkey's intervention threatens a full-blown civil war and a wider conflagration in the region.

The most senior Syrian officer to defect, Colonel Riad al-Asaad, has, along with other army personnel, taken refuge in Turkey. According to the *Independent* newspaper, Turkey has for several months been providing a constant guard for the defectors and is helping them organise a Free Syrian Army.

The newspaper said that the rebels' aim was to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad with a "strategy based on guerrilla attacks and assassinations of security force figures and state-sponsored militias amid signs of growing armed resistance against the regime after months of protests."

Colonel Asaad said that about 15,000 soldiers, including officers, had already deserted, and that morale in the Syrian army was low. He told Reuters, "Without a war, he [Assad] will not fall. Whoever leads with force cannot be removed except by force."

He added, "The regime used a lot of oppressive and murderous tactics, so I left.... I will be the face outside for the command inside, because we have to be in a secure area and right now there is no safety in all of Syria."

"We're in contact with defectors on a daily basis. We coordinate on a daily basis with officers. Our plan is to move to Syria. We're waiting to find a safe place which we can turn into a leadership base in Syria."

Colonel Asaad said that he was working with another rebel force inside Syria, the Free Officers Movement, and called for the "international community," meaning the major imperialist powers, to provide the opposition with arms and enforce a no-fly zone. He told *Hurriyet Daily News*, "If the international community helps us, then we can do it, but we are sure the struggle will be more difficult without arms."

There have been reports that Turkey may set up a "buffer zone" or "safe haven" on the Syrian side of the border. This has been denied by Ankara, but the refugee camps it has set up on the Turkish side of the border, holding 10,000 people, contain Syrian insurgents seeking to regroup and rearm under Turkish protection. Any safe haven would in reality be a forward military base from

which to supply anti-regime forces.

According to *DEBKAFfile*, a military intelligence web site based in Jerusalem, NATO and Turkey have been planning an intervention in Syria and have discussed "pouring large quantities" of weaponry to arm the opposition against Assad's forces, as opposed to Libyan-style air strikes. Saudi Arabia has been involved in the discussions, since it plays a key role in providing funds for the Islamists who have led the uprisings.

Furthermore, reports *DEBKAFfile*, Syrian oppositionists "have been training in the use of the new weapons with Turkish military officers at makeshift installations in Turkish bases near the Syrian border."

In a tacit acknowledgement of the claims, long denied by oppositionists, that the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist anti-regime elements have been using antitank weapons and heavy machine guns, *DEBKAFfile* reported, "[Syrian forces] are now running into heavy resistance: awaiting them are anti-tank traps and fortified barriers manned by protesters armed with heavy machine guns."

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that army defectors had killed 11 soldiers, including 4 in a bombing in Idlib province in the northwest and five in Homs, and wounded scores of others. This follows an earlier report by the same organisation that more security personnel were now being killed in the conflict than civilians.

Damascus has repeatedly claimed that the unrest was fomented by outside sources. In June, the Assad regime accused Ankara of supporting a rebel incursion into northern Syria at Jisr al-Shughour.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's support for the insurgent forces brings Ankara—NATO's only member in the Middle East—more closely in line with the Obama administration, which has called for President Assad to step down, although it has publicly ruled out a Libyan-style military intervention.

Two weeks ago, the Turkish army, NATO's second largest, carried out military manoeuvres in Hatay province on Syria's northern border. This was formerly part of Syria until ceded by France, as the colonial power in Syria and Lebanon, to Turkey in 1939 to keep Ankara out of World War II.

Last week, following Russia and China's veto of a US-sponsored United Nations resolution against Syria, Erdogan announced that his country would impose economic sanctions on Syria. This is aimed at bringing about a rift between Syria's Sunni

business elite and the Assad regime. Sanctions are expected to have a major impact on Syria's economy, particularly in the north and in Aleppo, Syria's largest city, with which Ankara has developed close trade and investment relations.

These economic sanctions are in addition to Turkey's embargo on arms to the Assad regime. The Turkish navy has already intercepted arms bound for Syria.

Alongside its military and economic interventions, Ankara has sponsored several conferences aimed at forging a viable political opposition from among Syria's fractured dissidents that could form the basis for a future government, along the lines of the NATO-backed National Transitional Council in Libya. The absence of a united and coherent opposition has been one of the factors hampering Western efforts to bring down the Assad regime.

Earlier this month, Syrian opposition groups met in Istanbul to form a Syrian National Council (SNC), elect a leadership, and seek support from the "international community" in the form of political pressure and further economic sanctions.

The SNC is a fractious coalition of organisations representing dissident sections of the Syrian bourgeoisie that are seeking to establish their own anti-democratic regime in Damascus with the backing of the various imperialist and regional powers, each of which has its own stooges.

The organisation's newly elected chairman and spokesperson, Paris-based academic Burhan Ghalioun, said the Council called for peaceful opposition to Assad and opposed foreign intervention in Syria.

But Ghalioun is little more than a front man for the real powers within and behind the SNC. Other members and opposition groups, particularly inside Syria, are calling for international military intervention in the form of no-fly zones over Syria's borders in the north with Turkey, in the west with Lebanon, and in the south with Jordan, the areas that have seen the fiercest fighting. While ostensibly to "protect civilians," this is nothing less—as Libya has shown—than a call for close air support to back armed opposition on the ground to government forces.

Turkey's proxies within the SNC are the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood, which are banned in Syria but backed by the Saudis, the Gulf monarchies and forces around former Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Lebanon. Turkey has also enlisted some Kurdish groups that are opponents of Turkey's Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) to police Syria's Kurdish population.

Including a token Kurdish presence within the SNC is problematic for Turkey, which is presently involved in heavy fighting with Kurdish forces in northern Iraq. But with or without a Kurdish element, the SNC provides a veneer of legitimacy for Ankara's intervention in the Syrian conflict.

Representing Washington's interests in the SNC are the Damascus Declaration group of dissidents, consisting of former regime supporters, members of Syria's fractious and tiny political parties, nominally "socialist" and "communist," and Arab nationalists. They were set up and funded by the Bush administration in 2005 to provide the basis for a "colour revolution" in Syria following the crisis provoked by the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister and

billionaire businessman Rafik Hariri, which was attributed by the US to Syria.

The SNC also includes the Local Coordination Committees that organise the protests within Syria, tribal leaders, and other groups such as the Syrian Revolution General Committee.

Earlier this week, the Council met with Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, to seek backing for its plans, although this official had earlier denied that such a sensitive meeting was planned. *Gulf News* reported Davutoglu as saying that Ankara was, if necessary, prepared for an all-out war with Damascus.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem has warned that his government would take "severe" measures against any country that recognised the SNC and protested Turkey's imposition of sanctions against his country, saying that "[Turkey's] hostility will backfire on them."

The European Union has welcomed the formation of the SNC as a "positive step," along with the US and Canada, and called for other countries to follow suit. It stopped short of recognising the SNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, but the Libyan NTC and the Egyptian opposition group Democratic Coalition for Egypt have done so.

The Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani was one of the prime movers calling for international intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya. His state-backed *Al Jazeera* network has relentlessly attacked the Syrian regime, causing its bureau chief in Beirut to resign in protest over its blatant propaganda. The sheikh has supported the SNC, stating, "I think this council is an important step and for the benefit of Syria."

General David Petraeus, who recently became CIA director, met with oppositionists in Turkey last July. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was reported as meeting members of the Syrian opposition for the "first time" on August 2, although she was in Turkey during the meeting of opposition groups that announced the formation of the Syrian National Council.

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