

International tensions mount over Syria conflict

By Patrick Martin
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The United States and other imperialist powers are pushing ahead with plans for military intervention and the overthrow of the Syrian government, convening a meeting Friday in the Tunisian capital, Tunis, of so-called “Friends of Syria.”

Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem, speaking Monday after a meeting of Mediterranean region foreign ministers in Rome, said his government had decided that “The Syrian National Council (SNC), the largest Syrian opposition group and other opposition groups will be represented at the Tunis meeting.”

The SNC is an amalgam of CIA hirelings, Islamic fundamentalists and disaffected former officials of the Assad regime in Syria, sponsored by Turkey and the United States in a maneuver similar to the creation of the National Transitional Council in Libya, which provided a pretext for the US-NATO war against that country.

An SNC spokesman said the group would go to Tunis to seek military aid to the Free Syrian Army (SFA), the armed wing of the “rebels.” The SFA was formed on Turkish territory but engages in attacks on government installations inside Syria—including the assassination Monday of a high-ranking judge and prosecutor.

The two countries that have the closest relations with Syria, Iran and Russia, are excluded from the meeting of the “Friends,” along with China, which joined with Russia to veto a UN Security Council resolution that would have opened the door to a Libyan-style military intervention in Syria.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated that the meeting in Tunis was directed at Syria’s international allies, as well as against the Assad regime itself. She said, “We’ll send a clear message to Russia, China and others who are still unsure about how to

handle the increasing violence but are up until now unfortunately making the wrong choices.”

Despite Clinton’s demagoguery about demonstrating “that the brave Syrian people need our support and solidarity,” the outcome of the US-led campaign against Syria will be an intensification of the civil war in Syria and the slaughter of tens of thousands of Syrians.

A major focus of Friday’s meeting in Tunis will be the Arab League’s call—dictated by the ultra-reactionary monarchies of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf oil states—for a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping force in Syria. Italian foreign minister Giulio Terzi, also speaking to the press after the Rome meeting Monday, reiterated his support for the Arab League plan. Assad has rejected such a force as an obvious Trojan horse for the deployment of foreign troops inside Syria to overthrow his government.

There are divisions within leading US circles over what method of subversion will best serve imperialist interests in Syria. On a visit to the Egyptian capital, Cairo, Senator John McCain, a Republican Party spokesman on foreign affairs, said that Washington should help arm the Syrian opposition, although he said this could be done indirectly.

“We have seen in Libya that there are ways to get weapons to people so that they can defend themselves,” he told a press conference. “It is time that we gave them the wherewithal to fight back and stop the slaughter.”

The top US military official, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cautioned against such a course in a television interview Sunday. He said on CNN that it was “premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria, because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the

opposition movement in Syria at this point.” He cited “indications that al Qaeda is involved” in some of the armed actions inside Syria against the Assad government.

Underscoring the potential for the Syrian events to escalate into an international conflict, two Iranian warships docked Monday at the Syrian port of Tartus, in a show of support for Assad. The two ships transited the Suez Canal with the permission of the Egyptian military regime, only the second time in three decades that Iranian naval vessels have entered the Mediterranean Sea by that route.

The same day, Assad met with a visiting Russian parliamentarian, Alexei Pushkov, the latest in a series of high-level Russian emissaries. Pushkov criticized the role of “some influential big states” in intervening in Syrian affairs, a clear reference to the United States, Britain and France, which all supported the UN Security Council resolution that China and Russia blocked.

Meanwhile, there were conflicting reports about the conditions in Homs, Syria’s third-largest city and a focal point in the fighting between the armed opposition and Syrian troops. The city has been under sustained shelling for nearly three weeks, and Syrian government forces were said to have retaken control of the Ishaat district of the city, bringing tanks close to Baba Amro, a Sunni Muslim neighborhood that has been under the control of the opposition for several months.

Al Jazeera, the television network based in Qatar, one of the Arab sheikdoms supporting outside military intervention in Syria, claimed that the Syrian army was about to carry out a massacre in Homs. But the British Broadcasting Corporation reported that it was unclear whether the stepped-up fighting would lead to an all-out ground assault on the city.

Unverified atrocity reports by US-backed opposition groups are being used to pave the way for imperialist military intervention, on the model of Libya—where the allegedly impending “bloodbath” in Benghazi became the pretext for the US-NATO bombing.

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