

# In wake of Syria peace plan, US steps up bid for regime-change

By Bill Van Auken  
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In the wake of the acceptance of a United Nations peace plan by the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the US, Western Europe and Turkey are preparing a meeting in Istanbul to escalate the armed campaign for regime-change in Syria.

The so-called Friends of Syria, a group led by the US and its NATO allies, particularly France and Britain, as well as Turkey and the reactionary Gulf states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, is set to bring foreign ministers and representatives of some 70 countries to Istanbul on Sunday, April 1.

A French foreign ministry spokesman declared on Wednesday that the “Friends” conference will pass “judgment” on the Assad regime’s enactment of the six-point plan brokered by the United Nations envoy and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. There is little doubt that the imperialist powers and their allies among the Gulf monarchs will find Damascus guilty of violating the accord so as to justify stepped up support to armed groups seeking Syria’s destabilization and the downfall of Assad.

The six-point plan put forward by Annan won the support of both Russia and China, which had vetoed two previous UN Security Council resolutions demanding Assad’s ouster. Both countries pointed to last year’s Security Council resolution sanctioning a no-fly zone in Libya, which was exploited by Washington and NATO to provide pseudo-legal justification for an eight-month-long war to topple the government of Muammar Gaddafi.

Annan’s plan, however, makes no call for Assad to step down, the key element that made it acceptable to Damascus as well as to Moscow and Beijing.

The plan calls for Syrians to “commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country.” It also stipulates freedom of association and the right to demonstrate and calls for the government to provide a “list of all places” where it is detaining oppositionists and allow UN access to these places.

The plan proposes to initiate a “legitimate political process that leads to a democratic transition,” but demands of the Assad regime in this regard only that it “appoint an empowered interlocutor when invited to do so by the envoy [Annan].”

Speaking to reporters in Moscow on Monday, Annan allowed

that Assad may be forced to relinquish the presidency, adding, “but it’s not up to me, it’s up to the Syrians.”

The plan calls for a “United Nations supervised cessation of violence in all its forms,” and states that the government should halt troop movements into major population centers, end the use of heavy weapons in these centers, and begin pulling back military forces from them.

As a transitional step, it calls for a “daily two-hour humanitarian pause” in the fighting to allow for the provision of humanitarian aid to cities ravaged by fighting, while working toward a full ceasefire.

Washington lost no time in declaring the Assad regime in violation of the accord. “Assad has not taken the necessary steps to implement” Annan’s plan, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters in Washington Wednesday. Much of the Western media cited reports of continued clashes in Syria to make the same point.

For his part, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on a flight from Seoul to Tehran that he does not believe Assad will implement the plan, the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* reported Wednesday.

During a meeting with President Barack Obama in the South Korean capital, the two reportedly reached agreement on providing “non-lethal” aid to elements calling themselves the Free Syrian Army who have been waging an armed campaign, including terrorist bombings, to topple the Syrian government.

What kind of “non-lethal” aid can be provided to an organization that carries out car bombings and assassinations was not made clear by either Istanbul or Washington. The web site of the Turkish daily *Radikal*, however, provided this answer: “Senior Turkish officials are saying this: the unification of all the disparate and independently acting groups in Syria, each of which calls itself the Free Syria Army, under a single ‘command and control mechanism’ and to do whatever is needed, including the provision of the necessary tools and means, to achieve this.”

*Radikal* goes on to note that the so-called Free Syrian Army already has a center in Hatay in southwestern Turkey near the Syrian border, where it has been reported that foreign special operations troops are training and arming Syrian “rebels.” The aim of the “non-lethal” aid plan adopted by Obama and

Erdogan is to establish “communications and coordination between this centre and all the groups bearing the same name.”

The US and the other NATO powers are determined not to allow a negotiated UN agreement to derail their drive to effect regime-change in Syria through armed intervention. The stakes are too high and they have already invested too much.

A key preparation for the “Friends of Syria” conference was carried out on Tuesday. A meeting of some 300 Syrian opponents of the Assad regime was organized by the Turkish government in conjunction with the Qatari regime in an Istanbul suburb.

The aim was to corral the disparate forces opposed to Assad into accepting the Syrian National Council (SNC) as an umbrella organization that can be declared by the major imperialist powers to be the “sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people,” much in the same way that the Libyan Transitional National Council was anointed in the run-up to NATO’s ouster of the Gaddafi regime.

The conference, however, underscored the absence of any cohesive Syrian opposition and the dangerous fault lines opened up by the drive to bring down the Assad regime.

Among the first to walk out of the Turkish-Qatari-sponsored gathering was the Kurdish National Council, which refused to accept the Syrian National Council’s leadership after the body blocked any introduction of the Kurdish question into an amorphous statement of principles that supposedly embodies the shared vision of the various groups represented.

A statement affirming the national rights of the Kurdish people, who constitute up to 20 percent of the Syrian population, was unacceptable to the leadership of the SNC, not to mention its Turkish sponsors. The Turkish government is waging its own bloody war against the Kurds inside Turkey, which has claimed some 40,000 lives since 1984.

The Erdogan government cannot accept an affirmation of constitutional rights of Syrian Kurds—a population that fled Turkish oppression between the 1920s and 1940s—for fear that it would strengthen the struggle of Kurds inside Turkey.

Washington has no intention of interceding on behalf of the Kurds. Erdogan boasted after his meeting with Obama in Seoul that it was “pleasing to see the United States at our side in the fight against the [Kurdish] separatist terrorist organization.” He said that Obama had promised to provide Turkey with Predator drones to aid in suppressing Kurdish opposition.

Others left the SNC unity conference protesting that the organization was entirely undemocratic and was dominated by the Turkish-backed Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the end, the conference approved an innocuous document vowing to support a “civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent and sovereign state” in Syria, while providing no concrete program for how it would be realized.

An unnamed Turkish government official told the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* that this was sufficient. “If they agree on a document that puts forth a constitutional vision that is endorsed

by everybody ahead of the meeting of the Friends of Syria that will take place in Istanbul on 1 April, then the SNC [could be recognized] as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”

The official also called on the Free Syrian Army to stop operating as “gang-like” groups and subordinate themselves to the SNC.

A chilling indication of the character of these “gangs” was provided by the German news magazine *Spiegel’s* web site, which profiled the activities of a group of Islamist fighters who had held the Baba Amr neighborhood in the city of Homs before it was retaken by Syrian security forces.

The magazine interviewed several of these fighters in the Lebanese city of Tripoli. One of them, Hussein, said that he had been a member of a “rebel” death squad assigned to the execution of captured government soldiers and other perceived supporters of the Assad regime or those believed to be spies or traitors. He was quoted in the report as saying that he himself had decapitated four Syrian army soldiers with a knife.

He also reported that other “rebels” were assigned to an “interrogation squad” that tortured their captives until they confessed to crimes.

A second Free Syrian Army fighter, Abu Rami, said that the group had executed 150 men as of last summer, roughly 20 percent of its prisoners. “Moreover, when we realize that a Sunni is spying on us, we hold a brief trial for him,” he added, saying that another 200 to 250 people had been executed on this basis.

Both Russia and China have announced that they will not attend the “Friends of Syria” conference in Istanbul.

“Its participants aren’t looking for dialogue that could put an end to the conflict,” Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters in Moscow Wednesday. Russia boycotted the group’s February 24 meeting in Tunis on the same grounds. “On the contrary, it may pave the way for external interference,” he said.

Both Moscow and Beijing know that behind the “human rights” rhetoric about Syria, Washington and its allies are seeking to topple Assad and impose a regime dominated by Sunni Islamists in order to isolate and undermine Iran in preparation for war. The aim is not only to eliminate this key regional rival, but also to deprive both Russia and China of easy access to the region’s energy resources. Thus, contained in the imperialist intervention in Syria is the threat of far wider wars.

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