

US, allies step up military backing for Syria's sectarian insurgency

By Chris Marsden
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On Sunday, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad made his first public speech in several months. He focused his remarks on the sponsorship of the opposition by the Western powers and its domination by Islamist forces. Any “political solution” in Syria “would require that regional powers stop funding and arming [the opposition], an end to terrorist operations and controlling the borders,” he said. “We will not have dialogue with a puppet made by the West.”

He called for a “full national mobilisation” to fight against “terrorists who follow the ideology of Al Qaeda.”

The sectarian character of the opposition and the fact that it is sponsored by the US and Europe, in alliance with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, is Assad's main source of internal support. Many who oppose his brutal regime—Sunnis as well as Alawites, Christians and other minorities—back him for fear of what will come next.

Two days before Assad's speech, US troops began to arrive in Turkey to man Patriot missile defence batteries near the Syrian border. The dispatch of 27 personnel Friday to Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to survey the Patriot deployment is a first step towards launching an air campaign to establish no-fly zones, similar to that waged to depose Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland described the 27 troops as “a site survey team.” Over the next several days, the US will deploy personnel from an air defence battalion based in Oklahoma, according to the US European Command (EUCOM) in Stuttgart, Germany. They will fly into Turkey on military aircraft, with additional equipment arriving by sea.

A full deployment of 400 US troops will follow,

alongside troops from Germany and the Netherlands. German and Dutch Patriot missiles are being shipped to Turkey this week. The combined force of around 1,000 troops and six patriot missile batteries will be operational by the end of January. They will be under the overall control of NATO, but the missiles will be operated by their respective countries.

Two Dutch Patriot batteries will be transported on Monday to the port of Eemshaven from a military barracks in Vredepeel. Tomorrow, 30 Dutch and 20 German soldiers charged with preparing for the missiles' arrival by ship, scheduled for January 22, will fly from Eindhoven to Turkey. The 270 Dutch troops who will operate the missiles will leave for Turkey on January 21. German's defence ministry said that its Patriots would be shipped Tuesday from the port of Luebeck-Travemuende and would arrive at the Turkish port of Iskenderun January 21. German troops could number between 350 and 400.

Bound up with this deployment, Taftnaz airbase in northern Syria has been targeted for sustained attack by the Syrian opposition fighters, including a brigade of the Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate recently designated as terrorist by Washington. By seizing the helicopter airbase from government forces, they aim to shut down Syria's defensive capabilities in the region while the missile batteries are being stationed.

Coinciding with this multinational deployment of troops and missiles, there have been repeated allegations from NATO, all denied, that Syria used “scud-type missiles” against its opponents last month. NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen denounced the alleged use of these missiles as “an act of a desperate regime approaching collapse.” He said it underscored “the need for effective defence and protection of our ally Turkey.”

The CIA meanwhile claims that Syria has a 1,000-tonne stockpile of chemical weapons agents, including the nerve agent sarin and mustard gas, stored in 50 towns and cities.

Israel is making its own preparations for an escalation of the conflict, strengthening its military presence on Syria's Golan Heights. Israel Radio reported that Israel's armed forces will reinforce the 56-kilometre border fence between the two countries, adding anti-personnel trenches, quick response units and a new early-warning system. In November, Israel Defence Forces fired an anti-tank rocket into Syria after a mortar bomb accidentally landed in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the cabinet Sunday the Syrian regime was "unstable." He said that across the frontier, "the Syrian army has moved away, and in its place, global Jihad forces have moved in."

On January 1, *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that Israeli officials held talks in Jordan with Syrian opposition officials in advance of "a possible Israeli-US operation in Syria to protect the Golan Heights." This report was taken up by DEBKAF, a security think tank with close connections to Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad. It wrote: "There was no further information about this operation. Goings-on on the Israeli and Jordanian borders with Syria are officially blacked out. But European intelligence sources reveal nightly border clashes between US, Jordanian, Israeli special forces and Syrian rebels, on the one hand, and Syrian special forces, on the other."

The London-based *Al-Hayat* also reported Sunday that the United Nations is mulling its options regarding sending a peacekeeping force to Syria, gearing up to execute any decision made by the Security Council.

The preparations for intervention by the US, the European powers and Israel come amid innumerable reports of the opposition to President al-Assad being dominated by Sunni sectarian tendencies. The *Financial Times* last week cited Shaikh Adnan Arour, "a fierce and more radical Salafi", as the "godfather of sorts for the revolution, dedicating his programme on a Saudi television channel to the uprising, and propagating a more puritanical form of Islam.... His influence is such that he was co-opted into the leadership of some of the military councils."

Jabhat al-Nusra's "emir" is Abu Julaybib, a Jordanian relative of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head

of al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, or Al Qaeda in Iraq, who died in a US air strike in 2006. This weekend, the Assad regime was reported to have captured Mohamed al-Zawahiri, the brother of the new head of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Deraa, where he was meeting opposition activists. Deraa, near the Jordanian border, is a stronghold for Jabhat al-Nusra.

CBC's Marie-Eve Bedard interviewed various fighters in Aleppo, including nominal Free Syrian Army (FSA) commander Colonel Abdul Jabbar Akaidi. But she noted Abu Mohammad, commander of the Kata ib-Essalam brigades, stating that "The FSA and the coalition is only ink on paper", an "image created to present a united front for foreign governments." Most of the brigade fighters are Islamists seeking to establish Sharia law through Jihad.

"Jabhat al-Nusra is made up of fighters from other Muslim countries, many of them veterans of other conflicts," Bedard added. "The group has taken up residence in the very heart of Aleppo, in what used to be a nursing school."

Writing in *Al-Monitor*, Ali Hashem spoke of Alawites "under siege" in the capital Damascus, forced by the FSA to "flee toward safer areas in the capital or to their coastal strongholds in Tortuous and Lattakiya."

In the neighbourhood of Hajar Alaswad, "All the walls and shop doors had anti-regime writings.... 'Down with Bashar,' read one; 'Freedom or else we burn the Alawites,' read another."

One local resident declared, "Let us cut it short. FSA are the army of the Sunnis and we don't want the Alawites to rule us anymore!"

The extent of Islamist influence can be measured by the repudiation of Washington's cynical effort to target Jabhat al-Nusra as supposedly the only example of a Jihadist group by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the Syrian National Council and the Muslim Brotherhood.

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