

UN Vote Seen as Stepping Stone Toward Military Intervention in Syria

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The support by the United Nations General Assembly for the Arab League call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down on “humanitarian” grounds brings military intervention one step closer. The 137-12 vote, with 17 abstentions, is non-binding, but it gives a UN imprimatur to the Arab League proposal for regime-change that was blocked on the Security Council by Russia and China.

In the face of opposition from Moscow and Beijing, and given Syria’s strategic position in the Middle East as Iran’s ally, Washington, Paris and London must tread carefully. However, intervention now has the “Arab face” so desired by the Obama administration, along with the fig leaf of legitimacy imparted by the UN and the implicit authority of the “responsibility to protect” doctrine under which war was waged against Libya.

Rather than direct involvement, numerous political figures, newspapers and policy bodies are advocating arming the opposition Free Syrian Army as a preparatory step towards declaring “buffer zones” and “humanitarian corridors.” This would necessitate NATO bombing, fronted by one or more local proxies led by Turkey and the Gulf states.

Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said Wednesday that France had already started negotiating a new UN Security Council resolution on Syria with Russia, with the aim of creating humanitarian corridors. “The idea of humanitarian corridors that I previously proposed to allow NGOs to reach the zones where there are scandalous massacres should be discussed at the Security Council,” he told France Info radio.

In the US Senate, a bipartisan resolution was tabled Friday calling on the Obama administration to provide “substantial material and technical support” to the Syrian opposition.

Writing in the February 7 Guardian, Ian Black and Julian Borger noted that Obama’s National Security Council is said to be preparing a “presidential finding” consisting of “an executive order authorising covert action as a policy option.”

Turkey, which has an extended border with Syria and is the base of operations for the opposition’s political and military leaderships, the Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA), would have to play a leading role in any military assault. Sinan Ülgen, a former Turkish diplomat working for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Ankara had already positioned itself to head a regional force supporting a NATO operation. Turkey had “burned its bridges” by betting “heavily on regime-change,” he asserted.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan would all lend support, including military training and weapons, as they did in Libya.

The Financial Times has swung behind this option, beginning with both covert and overt efforts to strengthen the SNC and FSA. A February 13 editorial insisted that “every effort must be made to develop the unity and the programmatic coherence of the until now fractious rebel camp.” The editorial went on to say that arming the FSA would “soon require further steps such as safe havens for refugees that would then have to be defended, including by aerial bombardment.”

The Financial Times also opened its pages to Radwan Ziadeh, who published a column on February 15 entitled “Kosovo shows how the west can intervene in Syria.”

“The US was able to help create an independent Kosovo outside the UN Security Council, without losing any American troops,” he wrote. “A well-rounded intervention strategy would involve the following. First, as in Kosovo, the international community—be it a joint UN-Arab League mission or a coalition of ‘Friends of Syria’—must designate safe zones to be protected by air power.”

“Air-based defence from such a coalition could also be used to protect humanitarian corridors,” he added.

Ziadeh is among a number of SNC representatives being cited by the media to portray military intervention as a popular demand in Syria. All evidence, however, points to majority opposition, even among many of the forces opposing Assad, while the still substantial support for the Ba’athist regime is due to fear of Western intervention to install a Sunni regime that would persecute religious minorities.

Ziadeh is a senior fellow at the US Institute of Peace. He co-founded and served as the executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington. Among his other positions is visiting fellow at Chatham House, Britain’s Royal Institute of International Affairs.

The “Kosovo model” involved building up the Kosovo Liberation Army as a US military proxy that was used to destabilize the situation with a terror campaign and then provide a vehicle for open intervention. The SNC and FSA are collectively serving the same function, just as the National Transitional Council did in Libya.

This requires strenuous efforts to make the FSA fit the purpose. Jeffrey White, a defense fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told *Foreign Policy* magazine that the FSA’s forces are somewhere around 4,000 to 7,000, much smaller than the 40,000 it claims. Its command in Turkey has only limited operational control and there is an ongoing power struggle over who leads it—the Turkish-backed Col. Riad al Assad or the more recent but higher-ranking regime defector, Gen. Mustapha Sheikh.

In a joint press conference in Paris Friday, President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron focused on a demand for the Syrian opposition to unite. “We cannot bring about a Syrian revolution... if the Syrian revolution does not make an effort to rally together and organize,” said Sarkozy. “In Libya we couldn’t have had the revolution without the Libyans and we won’t be able to have a Syrian revolution without the Syrian opposition making enough effort to unite [so] that we can support them more.”

A meeting has now been organized of the Friends of Syria Group, led by Juppé and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, to address the divisions within the FSA and place it firmly under Western leadership through the SNC.

Despite its internal divisions, the FSA and operatives from various regional powers functioning under its umbrella have been mounting a KLA-style destabilisation operation for months. Journalist Nir Rosen, who has recently spent time with opposition fighters, gave a revealing interview in Al Jazeera, which is owned by the state of Qatar and is fiercely supportive of the anti-Assad uprising. In the interview, he makes clear that the opposition took up arms "from an early stage." He notes that, "by the summer there were regular ambushes of security officers" as the movement "evolved into a classic insurgency."

The opposition receives funds from "diaspora Syrians tied to Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, or to conservative clerics in the Gulf, [who] also send money to certain groups," he states.

In a comment that cuts across much of the propaganda being employed to justify intervention, he adds, "Every day the opposition gives a death toll, usually without any explanation of the cause of the deaths. Many of those reported killed are in fact dead opposition fighters, but the cause of their death is hidden and they are described in reports as innocent civilians killed by security forces, as if they were all merely protesting or sitting in their homes."

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