

US-led conference backs Syrian puppet group, threatens war

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Meeting Sunday in the Turkish city of Istanbul, the so-called “Friends of Syria” conference stepped up the US-led campaign to destabilize and oust the government of Syria through a combination of diplomatic maneuvers and direct military interference.

Washington leads the group of 74 countries, with the aid of the European powers and the pro-US dictatorships of the Middle East. The conference took place as former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan heads a UN monitoring mission in Syria, with the stated goals of bringing about a ceasefire and opening dialogue between the government and the opposition. The Syrian regime has signed on to Annan’s peace talks, though the main US-backed opposition groups have refused to do so.

Opening proceedings Sunday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made clear that the Annan mission is to be used by the “Friends of Syria” as a means to ratchet up tensions with the Assad regime and lay the groundwork for foreign military intervention.

“I need to state that if the Syrian regime does not cooperate [with Annan’s mission], it will be an inevitable requirement for the UN Security Council to fulfill its responsibility and put an end to the massacre in Syria,” Erdogan said. “If the UN Security Council avoids this historic responsibility once again, the international community will be left with no choice but to support the Syrian people’s right to self-defense.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton struck a similar note in her address to the conference, telling delegates that the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad would not observe the conditions of Kofi Annan’s peace talks. “Nearly a week has gone by, and we have to conclude that the regime is adding to its long list of broken promises,” said Clinton. “The world must judge Assad by what he does, not what he says. And we cannot sit back and wait any longer.”

The US-led “Friends of Syria” coalition was established earlier this year in order to circumvent the United Nations Security Council, which had been unable to pass resolutions against the Assad government due to the vetoes cast by Russia and China, whose governments refused to sign off on Washington’s campaign for regime-change in Syria.

Like the so-called “Coalition of the Willing” that the George W. Bush administration fashioned in the run-up to the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Obama administration has assembled the “Friends of Syria” group to provide a fig leaf to cover the brazen imperialist campaign against a former colonial country in the oil-rich Middle East.

The Istanbul conference invited members of the Syrian National Council (SNC) to attend as

representatives of the Syrian people. In a statement to the press before the start of the talks, SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun called on the delegates to militarily enforce “humanitarian corridors” inside Syria and to increase the supply of arms to the opposition. “We have repeatedly called for the arming of the Free Syrian Army,” Ghalioun said. “We want the Friends of Syria conference to live up to this demand.”

As Washington and its allies well know, the SNC is a deeply divided outfit with little popular support inside Syria. Together with its allies, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and various Islamist militant groups, the SNC is implicated in terrorist attacks on government personnel and buildings that have killed many civilians, as well as kidnappings, torture and sectarian killings.

Nonetheless, the final communiqué of the “Friends of Syria” meeting accorded the SNC the status of “legitimate representatives of all Syrians.” This new title has no weight in international law, but is intended as a mechanism to promote the SNC as a government in waiting, in the same way as the “rebel” National Transitional Council was boosted in the run-up to the NATO-led war against Libya to oust the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

The SNC and the FSA are based in Turkey, and have received arms, financing and training from other pro-US governments in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Washington last week officially announced that it would also arm the anti-Assad militants, providing “non-lethal” aid such as sophisticated communication systems that will allow opposition fighters to better coordinate their attacks inside Syria.

The Istanbul conference discussed establishing a “trust fund” for the SNC, though there remained disagreement among the delegates on how the money should be used. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are pushing for the cash to be made available to purchase weapons for opposition fighters. Washington and the European powers appear reluctant to openly commit to this, preferring to limit the use of funds to supposed “humanitarian” projects.

Clinton announced that the US would provide an additional \$12 million in support for the SNC, while Germany’s foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, stated that his government would contribute \$7.6 million to the opposition. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies are understood to be preparing a multimillion dollar contribution to the fund.

The money will be funneled to the Syrian National Council, which will be the conduit for funds to those engaged in armed attacks within Syria. The group’s president Ghalioun said, “The SNC will take charge of the payment of fixed salaries of all officers, soldiers, and others who are members of the Free Syrian Army.” In other words, the so-called “rebels” in Syria are nothing more than paid mercenaries of the imperialist powers and the Gulf sheikdoms.

By solely recognizing the SNC at the Istanbul conference, Washington and its allies are also attempting to delegitimize all other Syrian opposition groups. For example, one opposition bloc, the National Coordination Committee, which has participated in negotiations with the Assad regime through the mediation of the Russian government, was not invited to the conference.

Russia and China did not join the “Friends of Syria” meeting, and refused to participate in the last such gathering in Tunisia in February. The Kremlin condemned the meeting in Istanbul as a distraction from the ongoing diplomatic mission of Kofi Annan, and an attempt to destabilize Syria rather than bring about peace talks.

According to a Russian foreign ministry statement Saturday, the Istanbul meeting was not “looking for dialogue that could put an end to the conflict. On the contrary, it may pave the way for external interference.”

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev last week claimed that the demands of Washington, the Western European powers and the Gulf monarchies for Assad’s immediate resignation were “shortsighted” and likely to prolong the conflict, while insisting that the UN-sponsored mission under Kofi Annan was the “last chance” to prevent full-scale civil war in Syria.

The government of Iraq also refused to send delegates to the Istanbul conference. Iraqi spokesman Ali Mussawi told the AFP news agency last week that Baghdad wanted to “maintain our mediation role, and the role of mediator sometimes requires not participating in this conference or that.”

Behind the hypocritical talk from Washington and its allies about “democracy” and “human rights,” the campaign against Syria articulated at the Istanbul conference is aimed at ousting Assad and replacing his Ba’athist regime with one more directly subordinated to imperialist interests. This is part of a broader US strategy to refashion the energy-rich Middle East that includes regime-change in Iran, Syria’s principal ally in the region.

In a further sign that Washington is preparing for war against Iran, President Barack Obama announced Friday that sanctions against the Iranian oil and gas industry, already passed by the US Congress, would be implemented. To mitigate the impact this will have on global oil prices, which have spiked by 20 percent this year, largely due to commodity traders speculating on the outbreak of a new war in the Middle East, the Obama administration has won an agreement to increase oil production from Saudi Arabia.

According to CNN, during talks Friday between Secretary Clinton and Saudi King Abdullah, ostensibly in preparation for the “Friends of Syria” meeting, the king agreed to make up for the loss of Iranian oil under the US sanctions. This would equate to Saudi Arabia increasing production by between one and two million barrels per day.

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