

Western push to oust Syrian regime escalates

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Statements by top Iranian officials last weekend are another indication of the destabilising impact of the escalating efforts by the US and its allies to oust the Syrian regime of President Bashar al Assad. Ali Akbar Velayati, a top aide to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, told the media that “an attack on Syria would be considered an attack on Iran and Iran’s allies.”

The warning, the sharpest by Tehran since the civil war in Syria began, came as batteries of patriot missiles deployed by the US and NATO on the Syria-Turkey border, manned by hundreds of NATO troops, began to go operational. On Saturday, a pair of missile batteries provided by the Dutch government became active at Adana in Southern Turkey.

According to media reports, a German security official confirmed on Tuesday that the two German missile batteries, stationed near the city of Kahramanmaras, 100 kilometres from the Syrian border, also became functional as of Monday. The US government has deployed two missile batteries to the border region.

The US, NATO and the Turkish government claim that the missile batteries are purely defensive—aimed at protecting civilians in southern Turkey from Syrian missiles. In reality, the deployment of the missiles is a preparation for the imposition of a no-fly zone and a campaign of aerial bombardment to support anti-Assad militias—along the lines of the Libyan regime-change operation.

On Tuesday, the US government committed \$155 million in “non-lethal” and “humanitarian aid” to be channelled into pro-Western forces in Syria. A CNN report noted that previous “non-lethal” aid to anti-Assad fighters had included advanced technology, such as phones, computers and cameras.

On Sunday, Israel stepped up the pressure on the Assad regime. The Israeli military deployed two missile systems, part of an “Iron Dome” battery, near

the northern Israeli city of Haifa, close to the Israeli-Syrian border. While some Israeli security officials claimed the deployment was a routine rotation of military infrastructure, it coincided with a significant ratcheting up of the threats against Syria.

Following meetings among Israeli security officials, Israel’s vice prime minister Silvan Shalom suggested that Israel could launch an attack on Syria, using the pretext of preventing Syrian chemical weapons coming into the hands of Hezbollah, or Al Qaeda-linked organisations. Speaking on an army radio station, Shalom declared that such a possibility “would be crossing a line that would demand a different approach, including even action.” He did not rule out a pre-emptive attack.

Chemical weapons have been repeatedly raised as a possible pretext for war since last December, when unspecified American intelligence reports first claimed that Assad’s regime could unleash chemical weapons against the opposition. Allegations that the Syrian government is preparing to use chemical weapons, or transfer them to other organisations, have never been backed up by evidence. In December, it was revealed that the Israeli government had twice asked Jordan for support and assistance in carrying out Israeli strikes against Syria.

On Monday, the French government pressed for a stronger support for the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)—the puppet regime-in-waiting being established by the US and its allies. While content to allow Al Qaeda-linked militias inside Syria to weaken the Assad regime militarily, there are growing concerns in Paris and other imperialist centres that such groups could marginalise the overtly pro-Western SNC and its associated fighters.

Late last year, the US and other major powers reshaped the Syrian National Council into the SNC in a bid to bring opposition groups more firmly under their

control. Inside Syria, however, Islamist extremists such as al Nusra have remained in the forefront of the fighting.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius called on the Friends of Syria group meeting in Paris to provide greater finance to the SNC, warning: “Facing the collapse of a state and society, it is Islamist groups that risk gaining ground if we do not act as we should... Chaos is not tomorrow, it is today and we need to end it.”

At a meeting in Marrakech last month, the Friends of Syria group, which involves more than 50 nations, pledged \$100 million to support the SNC. But SNC vice president George Sabra complained that the money had not arrived and was insufficient. He said that at least \$500 million was needed to set up a viable government-in-exile, and repeated an appeal for arms.

The SNC has been recognised by over 100 countries, but is yet to form a provisional government. France, which is playing an increasingly prominent role in the predatory scramble for Africa and the Middle East, was the first country to recognise the organisation as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people. The SNC is dominated by Islamists with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Around two-thirds of the 30-member unified military command elected at an SNC conference in December reportedly also had links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Another push for greater Western intervention and arms emerged at the World Economic Forum held at Davos last week. Prince Turki Al-Faisal, former chief of Saudi intelligence, called on the major powers to provide the Syrian opposition with sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry, noting that this would strengthen their ability to “select the good guys, and ... build their credibility.”

These comments underline the danger that the Syrian civil war conflict will expand into a broader regional conflict. With the backing of the US and its European allies, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are deliberately fanning sectarian animosities, along Sunni-Shiite lines, not only in Syria but throughout the Middle East, directed in particular against the Shiite regime in Iran.

The warning by top Iranian officials last weekend against Western intervention to oust its Syrian ally demonstrates just how quickly a broader conflagration could erupt.



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