

US-backed Syrian “Rebels” in Disarray

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Four days of meetings in Doha, the capital of Qatar, of Western-backed elements backing the overthrow of the Syrian government began in disarray Sunday, following last week’s demand by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for a shakeup within the so-called rebel leadership.

Clinton gave the Syrian oppositionists their marching orders last Wednesday, declaring that She dismissed the leadership that the US had previously supported as a gang of irrelevant exiles who had not set foot in Syria for decades and insisted that Washington wanted to connect with those who were “fighting and dying” in the civil war raging inside the Middle Eastern country.

In reality, it has become clear that the US is bent on fashioning a “respectable” leadership, with representatives from the various religious and ethnic groups that comprise the Syrian population in order to better mask the bitter sectarian character of the conflict that Washington is fueling, as well as the increasingly prominent role played by Islamist militias with connections to Al Qaeda.

The conferences in Doha began with a meeting of the SNC, sponsored by the Arab League and Qatar’s Sunni monarchy, that was designed to bring in new members in an effort to stave off the US bid to deprive it of its franchise as the imperialist-backed Syrian opposition. Dominated largely by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the SNC indicated its sharp disagreement with the US move, while failing to clarify at the outset whether it would simply reject it or haggle for a better deal from Washington.

The US State Department has indicated that it is prepared to offer the SNC 15 seats in the 50-member leadership of the new front being cobbled together by Washington. Dubbed the Syrian National Initiative, this new front is supposed to convene in Doha on Wednesday and Thursday.

According to press reports, SNC chief Abdelbaset Sieda has rejected the US proposal, while arguing that his Syrian National Council should have at least 40 percent of the seats in the new Syrian National Initiative.

In announcing the shift in US policy during a press conference last week in Croatia, Clinton made it clear that Washington is handpicking a Syrian leadership that it intends to install as a transitional government that would serve as a US puppet. The State Department, she disclosed, had “recommended names and organizations that we believe should be included in any leadership structure.”

The announcement apparently took Washington’s allies by surprise. “The US government

gave no advance notice of its intention to renounce the council as the lead umbrella group, diplomats of three countries said," McClatchy Newspapers reported Monday. "They said their governments learned about the initiative from news accounts."

One Western diplomat cited by McClatchy questioned the wisdom of Clinton's remarks about picking the individuals and organizations to include in a new leadership. "Syrians will say the Americans are imposing the names," he said. "And I am not sure the Americans would propose the right people."

Turkey, which has played a major role in providing the so-called rebels with arms, military training, bases and other support, scrambled to respond to the US shift, convening a two-hour meeting between Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the leadership of the SNC in Ankara on Friday.

It is not clear whether the Sunni Islamist government in Ankara and the Sunni monarchy in Qatar, which has reportedly funneled large quantities of weapons to Islamist militias fighting inside Syria, are in agreement with the US move.

The American-driven creation of the new Syrian National Initiative has also been dubbed the "Riad Seif plan," after the principal individual advanced by the State Department to lead it.

Seif is a Syrian capitalist who began as a textile manufacturer before winning the Adidas franchise in Syria in the 1990s. He sought to build a bourgeois party as an alternative to the ruling Baathists and ran afoul of the Assad regime by challenging a deal that placed the country's major cellphone company in the hands of a member of the Assad family.

As the classified embassy cables made public by WikiLeaks made clear, Seif held regular meetings with officers of the US embassy in Damascus to apprise them of his own activities as well as give his assessment of developments within the Assad regime. In other words, he is Washington's man.

In her statement last week, Clinton issued her ultimatum to the SNC, declaring that it "can no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition."

This curious choice of words suggests that there is a need for a "visible" leadership, that is secular, solidly bourgeois and oriented to the West, to serve as a front for the real forces waging the war for regime change inside Syria, which are increasingly sectarian and Islamist, including large numbers of Al Qaeda-linked foreign fighters who have poured into the country from Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Chechnya and elsewhere.

This "visible" leadership would make it politically more feasible for Washington to intervene far more directly in the war in Syria once the US presidential elections are over.

The Russian government denounced the convening of the new opposition front in Doha, declaring that Washington was violating an agreement reached in Geneva last summer committing all parties to seek an end to the fighting and a negotiated transition to a new government in Syria.

The State Department, the Russian Foreign Ministry charged in a statement Monday, has issued "direct orders about what the Syrian opposition should do to form a 'government in exile' and about who should join such a government."

As Washington worked to set up its new opposition front in Doha, the vicious civil war it is fomenting inside Syria continued to give the lie to all the talk of humanitarian concern and democratic transition.

A car bomb went off Monday in a densely populated section of Damascus, killing 11 people and injuring at least two dozen more, many of them critically. The victims included women and children. Another suicide bomber attacked in Hama. The official state news agency, SANA, reported that two civilians were killed in the explosion and 10 others wounded in an attack on a state-run development agency. Opposition sources claimed that they had struck an outpost of Syrian security forces and killed 50.

In a third attack, two people were killed near Damascus by a roadside bomb.

The wave of attacks would have been denounced by Washington as terrorism if it had taken place elsewhere in the region, but in Syria such attacks enjoy US backing.

They follow the massacre last Thursday of at least a dozen Syrian soldiers captured by Islamist militiamen outside Saraqeb in northwestern Syria. A graphic video of the massacre uploaded onto social media the same day showed the militiamen beating and kicking wounded soldiers pleading for their lives. Screaming "Assad's dogs" at them, they forced the unarmed soldiers into a pile and then executed them with automatic rifle fire.

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