

Syrian President Tells New Cabinet: We Are at War

by Jeffrey Steinberg

June 26—Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, addressing his newly installed Cabinet today, delivered a chilling warning, that the country is at war. His stark comments came as foreign-armed and -financed rebels, including mercenaries, carried out armed attacks on Republican Guard buildings on the outskirts of Damascus, and the Turkish government issued new military rules of engagement, following the shooting down of a Turkish surveillance jet over Syrian territorial waters last week.

This morning, the Turkish government discussed the matter with NATO ambassadors in Brussels. While NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that NATO is not interested in military action against Syria, the action by Ankara could be a prelude to direct NATO intervention.

Addressing Parliament today, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed that Turkey would retaliate for the shoot-down, and warned that any Syrian troop buildup near the Turkish border would be considered a threat to Turkey and could trigger military action. The danger of a border war between NATO member Turkey and Syria can not be ruled out, despite statements from Turkish officials that they are not interested in a direct conflict.

Special UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan is still working on a Contact Group meeting in Geneva for June 30, and he continues to insist that Iran should be a member of the group, a proposal that has been supported by Russia and even by the Arab League. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that he would be prepared to attend such a meeting, which is seen as a

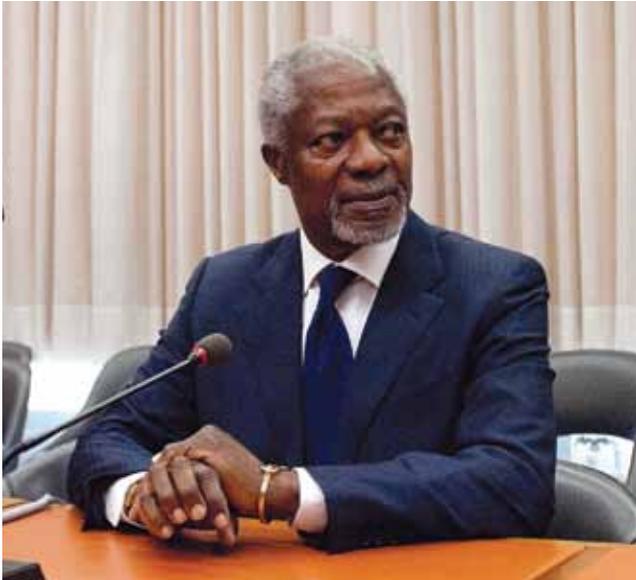
last opportunity to revive the ceasefire and negotiations envisioned in the Annan Plan. China has offered to host the Geneva meeting, reinforcing its alignment with Russia in blocking any UN Security Council endorsement of a Libya-style regime-change invasion of Syria.

The stumbling block to the Annan Plan and the proposed Contact Group remains the fact that Britain, France, the Obama Administration, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar are all hell-bent on regime change in Damascus, and are all involved in a coordinated arming of the opposition, which includes al-Qaeda and neo-Salafi fanatics.

The Saudi Role

In recent days, many prominent news agencies have detailed the role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in bankrolling the armed Syrian opposition, which is being further reinforced by the arrival of Salafist mercenaries from as far away as Tunisia. Sunni tribes in northern Lebanon and Iraq have been smuggling foreign fighters and heavy weapons into Syria, in what amounts to the biggest clandestine invasion since the Afghanistan mujahideen of the 1980s.

The *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* have all reported on the arrival of teams of CIA officers in Turkey, to coordinate the flow of arms to the insurgents. The CIA presence is complicated by the fact that the Agency is assigned to not only manage the flow of arms, but to prevent sophisticated weapons like rocket-propelled grenades and anti-tank



UN/Jean-Marc Ferré

UN-Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan is working to pull together a Contact Group meeting on the Syria crisis in Geneva June 30.

weapons from getting into the hands of the radical Salafists and al-Qaeda fighters. The Salafist insurgents are being sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which is committed to converting Syria into a Sunni Islamist state.

According to a senior U.S. intelligence source, an irony of the Syria fiasco is that the U.S. finds itself allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is viewed as the “moderates” among the armed anti-Assad forces.

Robert Baer, a retired CIA officer who worked in the Middle East for decades, noted in a recent published interview that the U.S. had dropped all contacts with the Syrian opposition in the mid-1980s, after the Hafez al-Assad regime had wiped out the Muslim Brotherhood and accused the U.S. of backing the overthrow plot at that time. The U.S., Baer warned, has had no ties to Syrian opposition forces for more than 20 years, and this is no time to be playing catch-up.

Putin Holds the Line

Russian President Vladimir Putin wrapped up a visit to the Middle East today, traveling from Israel, to Bethlehem in the West Bank, and then on to Jordan. Putin met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and with King Abdullah II of Jordan.

In Israel, he delivered a strong message: that it would not be in Israel’s interest to launch military actions against either Syria or Iran. According to senior U.S. intelligence sources, Putin has a great deal of influence in Israel, given that there are now over 1 million Russian

emigrés living in Israel. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is of Moldovan origin, and has close ties to the Russian President. The Russian voter bloc is crucial to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s political survival.

Despite Putin’s warnings, however, in the aftermath of the Moscow meeting between the P5+1 (UN Permanent Five plus Germany) and Iran, the drumbeat for a U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran has resumed, even though technical meetings between EU and Iranian experts are scheduled to begin next week, and are expected to lead to another round of P5+1/Iran negotiations sometime over the Summer.

According to a U.S.-based Israeli intelligence source, there is a growing convergence between Netanyahu and President Barack Obama over the possible political benefits of a late Summer military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Such a military strike, the source reported, could target Iran’s nuclear enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordo, and also hit targets in Syria and Lebanon.

As Lyndon LaRouche has been warning since the October 2011 assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, any military action by the U.S. and NATO against Iran and/or Syria would lead to a direct confrontation with Russia and China, one that would lead to thermonuclear war and the potential extinction of life on Earth. It is for that reason that any kind of general war, at this moment, is totally insane.

Putin and the entire Russian military and political leadership have made it clear that they will not repeat the mistake Russia made regarding Libya, when both Russia and China abstained from a UN Security Council vote authorizing “humanitarian intervention” to protect the population of the Benghazi region against Qaddafi’s forces. Instead, they saw NATO and the U.S. overthrow the regime and assassinate the head of state. Russia and China have both made it clear that any such “humanitarian” pretext for foreign invasion and regime change can lead to general war and the use of thermonuclear weapons.

Putin’s war-avoidance efforts have been buttressed by the fact that the U.S. military, led by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey, is equally committed to avoiding any new military confrontations. Dempsey has announced that he has invited his Russian counterpart, Gen. Nikolai Makarov, to meet with him in Washington in mid-July. The issue of war avoidance will be high on their agenda—if the Syrian and Iranian situations have not already blown up before that date.