



## Assad may opt for war to escape Russian, Arab, European ultimatums

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Qatari emir gives Iranian president a piece of his mind

Monday night and Tuesday, Aug-29-30, three international heavyweights - Russia, the European Union and key Muslim nations – gave Syrian President Bashar Assad tough ultimatums for ending his ferocious crackdown on protest. Nevertheless, on Monday, his troops shot dead 17 people in Syrian cities - even as he received Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov who arrived in Damascus with a last warning from President Dmitry Medvedev:

Recall you soldiers to their bases immediately and implement changes or Moscow will endorse UN Security Council sanctions stiff enough to stifle the Syrian economy.

Those sanctions are only a step away from a resolution authorizing NATO, together with Muslim and Arab nations, to intervene militarily in the Syrian crisis.

debkafile's military and intelligence sources disclose that Turkey, as a NATO member, and Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council, have been in discussions this past week on the form this intervention would take:

1. The long-considered Turkish plan to send troops into northern Syria and carve out a military pocket from which Syria's rebels would be supplied with military, logistic and medical aid.
2. Ankara and Riyadh will provide the anti-Assad movements with large quantities of weapons and funds to be smuggled in from outside Syria.
3. The Turkish military incursion would be matched by Saudi troops entering southern Syria at the head of GCC contingents. They would move in via Jordan and establish a second military enclave under GCC auspices.

The third option came up in Tehran last Thursday, Aug. 25, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad heard some straight talk from the visiting Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

debkafile's exclusive Iranian sources reveal that the Qatari ruler slapped down a blunt warning:

Assad was finished, he said, and advised Iran to face up to this. For the sake of even minimal relations with the Arab world, Iran must ditch the Assad regime in Damascus or face the real danger of the Syrian crisis deteriorating into a regional conflict – whether against Syria or by Syria, he did not explain.

Ahmadinejad turned the emir down flat, according to our sources. He said Iran would never renege on its pact with Assad.

Two days later, our military sources report, Syria deployed 25 anti-air missile batteries along its Turkish border.

In Brussels, Monday, the 27-member European Union bowed to Washington's demand and finally decided to corner Assad by clamping down an embargo on imported Syrian crude.

Europe is the biggest buyer of Syrian oil, importing \$4.5 billion worth a year. This provides Syria with its main source of foreign currency revenue and the primary funding for Assad's military operations against dissidents.

Once this source dries up, the Syrian ruler will be forced to cut down on those operations unless Iran is willing to make up the difference.

Assad is sure to appreciate that the coalition lining up against him of the US, Europe, Turkey,

the Gulf Arab nations and Russia, are almost identical to the alignment (barring Moscow) which has just overthrown Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Tripoli. He and his advisers have no doubt discussed the possibility of being at the receiving end of the same treatment.

Their ruler's growing isolation and the real prospect of international punitive measures have given the opposition new heart after nearly six months of standing up to a deadly crackdown: Saturday, Aug. 27 Assad saw his own capital rallying against him with big demonstrations in central Damascus. The pressure from the street continued to build up through Sunday and Monday, some of the protesters venturing to hoist the old Syrian Republican flag instead of the Baathist version introduced by the Assads.

Aleppo is now the only Syrian city which has not so far come out against the regime. Tuesday morning, while Assad attended an Eid al-Fitr worship at a Damascus mosque, his soldiers sprayed demonstrators in the eastern town of Deir al-Zour with bullets.

Well-informed military sources warn that Assad will not be cowed by the international, military and economic noose tightening around his neck. He is far more likely to try and loosen it by lashing out against his enemies, starting with Israel. Iran will certainly be a willing supporter of such belligerence, starting a war which could spread like wildfire across the region.

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