

Insight: Arabs open way for arming Syrians, civil war feared
By Edmund Blair and Ayman Samir, Reuters
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After a bruising meeting in a five-star Cairo hotel, Arab foreign ministers led by Gulf states hinted to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that unless he halts his violent crackdown, some Arab League members might arm his opponents.

The message was folded into Article 9 of a League resolution passed on Sunday that urges Arabs to "provide all kinds of political and material support" to the opposition, a phrase that includes the possibility of giving weapons to Assad's foes.

Diplomats at the meeting confirmed this interpretation.

Arabs are striving to unite the world around their drive to push Assad to end the killing, but have gained little traction.

They had to scrap a floundering Arab monitoring mission to Syria. When they sought U.N. Security Council support for a transition plan under which Assad would step aside, Russia and China vetoed the Western-backed U.N. draft resolution.

Moscow is an old ally of Syria and its top arms supplier.

Sunday's Arab League meeting raised the stakes. Its implicit shuffle towards backing military resistance to Assad's forces was meant to add pressure on the Syrian leader and his Russian and Chinese allies. Yet it also risks leading to a Libya-style conflict or sectarian civil war that everyone wants to avoid.

"It is unacceptable for Assad to practice all types of killing of civilians while we stand silent," one Arab ambassador said, explaining the rationale behind the resolution that returned the Syria issue to the United Nations with a call for a joint U.N.-Arab peacekeeping force.

"We will back the opposition financially and diplomatically in the beginning but if the killing by the regime continues, civilians must be helped to protect themselves. The resolution gives Arab states all options to protect the Syrian people," the envoy said.

"All options" is diplomatic language that leaves room for a military response. Two other diplomats spelled it out more explicitly, saying the resolution could allow arms transfers.

Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Center, said the bloodshed was putting pressure on Arabs to act.

"The escalation is coming from the ground and it is coming from Assad himself. This is the reason they feel they cannot stand idly by just pursuing a diplomatic track," he said. "I suspect we will see a further militarization of this conflict, with potentially quite widespread and dangerous consequences."

"ALL KINDS OF SUPPORT"

Smuggled guns are filtering into Syria but it is not clear if Arab or other governments are backing any such transfers.

Iraqi security officials say there are signs Sunni Muslim insurgents are beginning to cross the border to join Syrian rebels. Smugglers are cashing in as prices double for weapons reaching Syria concealed in commercial traffic.

For now, however, such weaponry cannot match the firepower that Assad's military can bring to bear, analysts say, but that could change if Assad fails to heed Arab peace calls.

A non-Gulf Arab ambassador said Qatar and Saudi Arabia had insisted on the "material support" wording to cover "all kinds of support including weapons in future", adding: "But we see this as a dangerous escalation."

A senior Arab diplomat voiced fears that such a step could ignite a conflagration in Syria, a nation of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds and Druze at the heart of the Arab world.

"It is a very sensitive situation in Syria. The door is open for a lot of possibilities," he said. "I think now Syria is at the beginning of a kind of civil war."

Syria's crisis has provoked a lop-sided rift among Arabs.

Sunni-ruled Gulf states, broadly driven by a desire to oust Assad, an ally of their Shi'ite regional rival Iran, have the financial and political muscle to push through calls to isolate the Syrian leader. Wealthy Gulf countries, Bahrain apart, have also emerged with few scars from the wave of Arab uprisings.

Egypt, Algeria and Iraq, traditionally regional heavyweights with big populations and the largest armies, may have misgivings on Syria, but have limited clout for now. Algeria registered reservations about a joint U.N.-Arab force. Others kept quiet.

All three have challenges at home that blunt their ability to project their views. Iraq has its own sectarian divisions; Algeria has escaped a popular uprising, but remains wary; Egypt's generals may not like intervention in an Arab state but are preoccupied by street protests against military rule.

Lebanon, long dominated by its Syrian neighbor and its own Syrian- and Iranian-backed Shi'ite armed movement, Hezbollah, was the only League member formally to object to the resolution.

Highlighting the turmoil in the Arab world, Sunday's meeting in Cairo was shifted to the Marriott hotel across the Nile from the League's headquarters, located uncomfortably close to Tahrir Square, the focal point for Egyptian protesters.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, set the tone for the gathering in the plush surrounds of the former royal palace, making the case for backing the Syrian opposition.

"NOT OPEN TO DISCUSSION"

In a speech before closed-door talks began, he told Arab ministers: "At our meeting today I call for decisive measures, after the failure of the half-solutions."

From then on, it was clear who was in charge, according to the non-Gulf envoy, who, like others, asked not to be named.

"These meetings were not open to discussion. The Gulf foreign ministers had positions and decisions they had reached earlier and they did not want to hear anything else," he said.

The six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council had met separately earlier in the day. One source said their line was backed by Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia, which will host a gathering of Arab and other "Friends of Syria" on February 24.

An Arab source who attended the meetings described tetchy discussions on what kind of U.N.-Arab mission the League should request from the United Nations.

When a call for international "monitors" was proposed, Gulf ministers retorted that "what is happening in Syrian cannot be stopped without a peacekeeping force," the source said.

The meeting settled on requesting a "force".

The source said Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, who was in the chair, also led calls for ending the Arab monitoring mission, which had been criticized by Syria's opposition since it began work in December and which has also faced internal dissent and logistical problems.

The monitoring team was duly scrapped in the resolution.

Yet prospects for securing U.N. Security Council backing for a joint peacekeeping force seem dim.

Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby floated the idea last week with the U.N. secretary-general. But it received only a lukewarm response from diplomats in New York, even though the United States and others said they would consider it.

"It really isn't realistic when there isn't a peace to keep ... This needs looking at as a future option rather than an option for now," said a Western diplomat at the United Nations.

"NO WESTERN BOOTS ON THE GROUND"

The diplomat referred to the "unfortunate" precedent of the joint U.N.-African military force UNAMID sent to Sudan's Darfur region, which he said had lacked a clear command structure.

"I don't see the way forward in Syria as being Western boots on the ground in any form, including in any peacekeeping form. I think they would need to come from other countries, rather than Western nations," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said.

Syria would have to agree before such a force could deploy. It accepted the unarmed Arab monitors, but only after weeks of foot-dragging, and swiftly rejected Sunday's Arab resolution.

The joint force request was aimed at focusing minds by "throwing this back to the United Nations and asking questions of Russia", said Shaikh of the Brookings Doha Center.

"If this moment is lost, we may well see a continuing polarization in the international community's response and a slide into greater conflict on the ground," he said.

The acid test will be Russia's response, with China expected to follow Moscow's lead, analysts says. For now, Russia has said it will consider the Arab appeal but without much enthusiasm.

To circumvent the Security Council, where Moscow and Beijing have twice vetoed Syria resolutions, Arabs will take their peace plan to the U.N. General Assembly, which is expected to vote on the Saudi-drafted resolution this week. Such resolutions cannot be vetoed but are non-binding.

Winning U.N. support is not the only Arab challenge.

Arabs have thrown their weight behind a Syrian opposition that is far from united, deterring full recognition of bodies such as the exiled Syrian National Council (SNC).

"The main problem on the side of the Syrian opposition is that it is still scattered," said the senior League diplomat. "They don't have a united leadership or a single voice."

The Arab resolution called for the opposition to "unify its ranks" and SNC members hovered around the Cairo meeting holding talks with ministers on the sidelines. Syrian officials were absent after Damascus was suspended from the 22-member League.

Some Arab nations have made clear they no longer consider Assad's government legitimate. Gulf states said last week they were recalling their ambassadors from Syria and expelling Syria's envoys. Libya and Tunisia, both countries where popular revolts toppled autocratic rulers last year, have done the same.

The Arab diplomat said the "Friends of Syria", a group backed by Western powers, could help "persuade all opposition factions from Syria, inside and outside, to be one front".

(Additional reporting by Yasmine Saleh in Cairo and Patrick Worsnip in New York; Writing by Edmund Blair; Editing by Alistair Lyon)

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