

## Phares: "Congress backs the Syrian people, not the Islamists"

Contributed by Walid Phares / Newsnow  
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US still cautious as Syrian opposition gathers steam  
Paige Kollock, June 8, 2011

About 300 members of the Syrian opposition met in Brussels on Monday following a conference in Antalya, Turkey last week to form a unified opposition against President Bashar al-Assad and to seek the support of the international community.

The conference resulted in the formation of a 31-person committee composed of numerous sects and political groups, according to Radwan Ziadeh, founder of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies in Syria and a member of the opposition. Participants also released a statement calling on Assad to hand over power "immediately" in order to pave the way for the drafting of a new constitution and the holding of elections within a year, and for the formation of a democratic, secular state.

"The composition of the new committee and its statements have expressed a clear commitment [to] pluralism and democracy. Hence based on this, the US Congress and the European Parliament could work with this forum," said Walid Phares, a Congressional advisor, professor and author.

While the Syrian opposition has been drawing some international support, it's been slow, and the US is coming around at a glacial pace. Though the US and its Western allies pressed ahead with a resolution against Syria at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency on Wednesday, despite opposition from Russia and China, it took weeks of the Syrian government killing its own citizens for US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to finally hint last week that the United States is preparing to take a tougher stance against Damascus. State-sponsored killings over the weekend have made that support even more urgent.

Many thought President Obama's much-touted Middle East speech would be a turning point for US policy toward Syria, and in a sense, it was. Obama's remarks did include his sternest-yet language toward the Alawite leadership.

"Assad can either lead the transition currently underway in Syria, or get out of the way," said Obama on May 19. But since then, Assad has only continued his crackdown on peaceful demonstrators.

According to a State Department official who preferred to remain anonymous as he is not authorized to speak to the press, the United States has taken a number of steps to isolate Syria. They have imposed sanctions on individuals and entities committing human rights violations in Syria, including President Assad, and senior government and military officials. "We have also sanctioned Iranian organizations such as the Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force for the role they have played in assisting the Syrian government's repression," the official told NOW Lebanon.

Members of the Syrian opposition welcomed Obama's remarks in his May 19 speech, but are pushing for more action, namely a UN resolution.

"Our focus is on having a resolution in the Security Council that includes sanctions," Ziade said, stressing that US-backed economic sanctions have been successful in squeezing government members. "The Syrian economy is under severe crisis. Soldiers haven't received salaries for the last month&hellip; but such sanctions, with the UN, would be more effective. All the businessmen still support the Syrian regime. When they&hellip; and high-level diplomats see that the boat is sinking, it will encourage them to defect."

The US doesn't want to take a go-it-alone approach, a lesson learned from the costly and unpopular war in Iraq. So far they have the support of their European allies, which imposed an arms embargo and targeted sanctions against the president and Syrian government officials last month.

But the White House has a record of being particularly cautious when it comes to the Syrian regime. Israel, which has so far has indicated they would like to keep "the devil they know," is another consideration the US has to take into account. Another factor is Americans' fear of the rise of Islamic extremists.

"The US Congress&hellip; is concerned about the composition of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad. Both Republicans and Democrats wouldn't want to see radicals coming to power if Assad crumbles," said Phares.

But the Antalya conference should give diplomats the assurances they need.

"This is a coalition between all the Syrian opposition groups," said Ziadeh. "Now [the State Department] needs more information about the meeting and the next step, which will be the election of 11 opposition members to form an executive office,&rdquo; a group that will be responsible for meeting foreign diplomats in Europe and elsewhere.

While in Brussels, Syrian opposition members met with the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to present their case against Assad. They are also meeting with Arab diplomats in hopes to get their backing, which would help bring the US on board.

But Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institute, a think tank in Washington DC, says Arab support is not likely to come as easily as it did with Libya.

"I don't think [the situation in Syria] is analogous to Libya because Assad is clearly still in command, we have little Arab support to try to push him out, and we have fewer potent options for pursuing such a goal in any event," O&rsquo;Hanlon said.

He does think the US will reach a breaking point, though. "More of the same violence for a few more weeks would, I believe, be adequate to force our hand," he said.

And acts by Syria to provoke Israel, such as letting Palestinian protesters into the Golan Heights during the Naksa Day demonstration last week, would cause the US to "force our hand more quickly," he added.

Turkey's willingness to play a key role with regard to Syria may prove to be the regional support the White House needs. The Syrian opposition is planning another meeting in Turkey, expected to take place after the country's June 12 general elections.

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