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Syria attacks Arab League over 'conspiracy'

Foreign minister says league is implementing a foreign conspiracy, as Gulf states withdraw from observer mission.

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Syria has accused the Arab League of implementing a foreign conspiracy against the country, after a new initiative by the organisation called for President Bashar al-Assad to step down to end bloodshed in the country.

Walid al-Muallem, Syria's foreign ministry, told a press conference on Tuesday that the Arab proposal was a violation of his country's sovereignty, and attacked the league for its efforts to take its plan to the United Nations.

Muallem said the league was "implementing the conspiracy they have agreed to abroad against Syria," adding, "At this point in the conspiracy ... it's a provocation to bring the matter into international circles."

Gulf Arab states said earlier they had decided to withdraw their observers from the Arab League mission to Syria, saying that the much-criticised initiative had failed to stop the bloodshed.

Muallem signalled that the crackdown on dissent will continue, saying Syria's government has a "duty" to confront armed groups, "It is the duty of the Syrian government to take the necessary measures to address the problem of those armed elements who are wreaking havoc throughout Syria," he said.

The government is blaming the unrest, which the UN estimates have killed more than 5,000 people since March last year, on "terrorists".

Observer withdrawal

Tuesday's developments came after Saudi Arabia said on Monday that its observers would be withdrawn.

"Gulf Co-operation Council [GCC] states have decided to follow Saudi Arabia's decision to pull out its observers from the Arab League mission in Syria," the regional bloc said in a statement on Tuesday.

It said the GCC was "certain the bloodshed and killing of innocents would continue, and that the Syrian leadership would not abide by the Arab League's resolutions".

The GCC groups Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. There are 52 out of 165 observers from those states in Syria, 22 of them from Saudi Arabia.

After the announcement, the Arab League said its permanent member states would meet later on Tuesday to discuss the situation in Syria.

"The meeting of representatives today will discuss the fate of the monitoring mission, whether it continues or withdraws," Sudan's envoy to the League, Kamal Hassan Ali, told Reuters news agency.

UN meeting request

The Arab League also formally requested a meeting with UN chief Ban Ki-moon in New York to discuss **its plan** for resolving the Syria crisis and to ask for the Security Council's support, according to Arab League deputy leader Ahmed Ben Helli.

Syria on Monday condemned the league's initiative calling on Assad to delegate power to his vice-president and for elections to be held under a "national unity government".

"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs," Syrian state television quoted a government official as saying .

The new plan envisioned the "peaceful departure of the Syrian regime" and resembled the arrangement in Yemen, where Gulf states convinced Ali Abdullah Saleh, the outgoing president, to delegate power and leave the country, Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani said.

The Arab League's observer mission decided to extend its mission after its one-month mandate expired last week.

General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi of Sudan, leading the team, said on Monday that violence in Syria dipped after the observers arrived.

"After the arrival of the mission, the intensity of violence began to decrease," he said. "The mission's role is monitoring and is not stopping the killing or stopping the destruction or otherwise."

Dabi also maintained that "heavy military equipment" was removed from "all cities" in Syria.

His comments were widely criticised by the opposition.

The Syrian Revolution General Commission activist has said at least 840 Syrians have been killed since December 23, when the first Arab League delegates entered Syria.

Critics say the Arab mission has only provided diplomatic cover for Assad to pursue a crackdown that has already killed more than 5,000 people since protests erupted in March 2011, according to a UN count.