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Hillary Clinton says Syrian military may oust President Assad

The secretary of State, at a conference in Tunis on the Syrian crisis, suggests that a military coup could topple the Syrian leader.

By Patrick J. McDonnell

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With deep divisions preventing forceful international action, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton suggested security forces long loyal to Bashar Assad and his family could oust the Syrian president and end the bloodshed that is ripping his country apart.

A much-anticipated gathering of representatives of more than 60 countries held Friday in the Tunisian capital highlighted divisions at multiple levels: within the anti-Assad international coalition, the fractured Syrian opposition and the people of Syria, where Assad maintains considerable support among minorities fearful of a takeover by Islamists.

Clinton and other leaders of a coalition calling itself Friends of Syria demanded an immediate halt to the violence, but ended up satisfying almost no one.

"This conference does not meet the aspirations of the Syrian people," said Burhan Ghalioun, leader of the Syrian National Council, an opposition umbrella group. Pro-Assad demonstrators rallied outside the venue.

The delegation from Saudi Arabia, frustrated at the failure to take more direct action such as arming the Syrian rebels, withdrew from the conference.

Clinton, in comments to reporters, raised the prospect of a coup to remove Assad, who has withstood an almost yearlong rebellion.

"We also know from many sources that there are people around Assad who are beginning to hedge their bets ... they didn't sign up to slaughter people," Clinton said.

Clinton cited the cases last year of Tunisia and Egypt, where militaries stepped in to remove longtime autocratic leaders after popular protests.

"We saw this happen in other settings last year," Clinton said. "I think it is going to happen in Syria."

Clinton's suggestion that top Syrian officers might take matters into their own hands was an explicit recognition of one scenario that could avert an even longer struggle: removing the polarizing figure of Assad, whose family has ruled Syria for more than 40 years. Much of the opposition, including the Syrian National Council, has rejected negotiations with Assad and insisted that he must go.

Clinton and other Obama administration officials have hinted that they would like to see elements within Syria oust Assad. But Robert Danin, a former State Department official now with the Council on Foreign Relations, said Clinton's statement Friday was "by far the most explicit call by the administration for what would be a coup."

"It would be the quickest, most expeditious way, and it would also leave intact one of the few functioning institutions in the country," Danin said. The administration has been publicly committed to trying to leave as much of Syria's order as possible intact, in part to calm the fears of minorities that Assad's departure could plunge the country into chaos.

The military "is still one of the few institutions in the country that can provide unity and stability," Danin said.

However, many Syria observers say the prospect of a coup is remote because of the presence around Assad of a coterie of loyal commanders and advisors from his minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Some Alawites have come to view the conflict as a sectarian fight for survival against radical Sunni Islamist forces backed by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-dominated Persian Gulf states.

Others say that even if there was a coup, there is no guarantee that other Alawite commanders would not keep on fighting, perhaps under the banner of Assad's brother Maher, who commands an important military brigade.

The conference opted not to recognize any opposition group as the sole representative of the Syrian people, a blow for the Syrian National Council. Instead, the international coalition labeled

the group "a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change," but it pointedly withheld exclusive recognition of any one faction among many opposition currents.

Its failure to embrace arming the disparate rebel movement may reflect doubts in Washington and elsewhere about the makeup of the insurgent forces and their commitment to democracy.

Reports have circulated of Islamic militants from Iraq and elsewhere heading to Syria to fight Assad's forces. Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman Zawahiri, recently called on Muslims from neighboring countries to join the battle to topple Assad.

The Syrian government blames "terrorists" backed by foreign countries for much of the violence, including several mysterious car bombings in major cities.

The conference attendees did agree to tighten sanctions against the Assad government, which is grappling with an economic free fall because of the violence and previous sanctions, including a European oil embargo.

The Saudi role is indicative of the geopolitical importance of Syria, a neighbor of Israel and a close ally of Iran, Saudi Arabia's fierce rival in the region. Analysts say Saudi officials are keen to see Assad replaced by a government reflecting Syria's majority Sunni population, which would presumably be hostile to Tehran.

Saudi Arabia and its gulf allies, especially oil- and gas-rich Qatar, reportedly pushed for some form of direct aid to the rebels, who are facing off mostly with rifles against Assad's heavily armored military.

"My country cannot take part in any [meeting] that would not lead to protecting the Syrian people," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal was quoted as saying, a clear rebuff of an approach that opposition critics call rhetoric over action.

During an appearance with Clinton in Tunis, the foreign minister said that arming the rebels was "an excellent idea."

Casting a shadow over the Tunisia meeting was the specter of neighboring Libya, where a Western-led bombing campaign contributed directly to the ouster last year of Moammar Kadafi.

Neither Russia nor China wants to see a repeat of the Libya scenario in Syria. The two countries have twice vetoed U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Assad's handling of the Syrian protests.

Neither Russia nor China attended the Tunis conference. Both nations have called for "dialogue" to resolve the Syrian crisis and are opposed to any international steps that could lead to foreign military intervention in Syria, where Russia has considerable business and strategic interests. Russia is also keen not to lose its last major ally in the Arab world.

Clinton denounced the stance taken by Russia and China as "despicable."

Assad did lose one longtime ally. The Palestinian militant group Hamas ditched its longtime patron and publicly backed the opposition. Hamas recently abandoned its former headquarters in Damascus, signaling a shift that was confirmed Friday. Assad still retains the support of militant group Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, which is also a close ally of Iran.

Opposition activists reported that violence continued to rage across much of Syria on Friday. The Local Coordination Committees, an opposition coalition, said at least 103 people died, 32 of them in the central city of Homs, which has been under government shelling for three weeks.

A group of international Red Cross and Syrian Red Crescent ambulances arrived in Homs' hard-hit Baba Amr neighborhood Friday to begin evacuating civilians, a Red Cross spokesman said. Among the injured were two Western journalists hit in shelling Wednesday that killed two other journalists: veteran U.S.-born reporter Marie Colvin of London's Sunday Times and French freelance photographer Remi Ochlik.