

Getting Syria-ous About Peace Talks

Exclusive: President Obama's decision to seek congressional approval before attacking Syria may represent a needed breather, slowing Official Washington's stampede into another war, but the only way to stop the bloodshed is to get the various sides into peace talks and it is the U.S.-supported rebels who won't go, notes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama has postponed a U.S. military strike against Syria so Congress can debate the issue and vote on a use-of-force resolution, a potential cooling-off period in the rush to war. But the larger problem remains unaddressed, the need to push the Syrian rebels into peace talks.

Though many Americans may believe from absorbing the mainstream U.S. news that it is Syria's President Bashar al-Assad who needs to be pressured to the negotiating table, the reality is that Assad has repeatedly offered to join peace talks in Geneva. It is "our" opposition that has refused to go.

The rebel leaders have offered up a host of excuses: they want the U.S. government to provide sophisticated weapons first; they want all Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon to withdraw; they want to be in a winning position before talks begin; they want Assad to agree to resign as a precondition of talks.

In other words, the fractious rebels, whose most effective fighters are allied with al-Qaeda, don't want peace talks; they'd rather wait for the United States and other outside powers to be drawn into the civil war and ensure Assad's ouster, an outcome that also could make Syria the new hotbed for terrorism in the Middle East.

Some rebels are already complaining that Obama shouldn't delay the missile strikes against Assad's military as punishment for its alleged use of chemical weapons and that the United States should dramatically expand the planned attacks. These rebels want a sustained U.S. military campaign to break the back of Assad's government.

From the rebels' point of view, therefore, it makes sense to continue their boycott of the peace talks, hoping that the continued carnage in Syria will eventually provoke the West to intervene more forcefully as occurred in Libya when NATO airpower tipped the balance of the civil war in favor of Islamist-dominated rebels and doomed secular dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

However, if the real goal of U.S. foreign policy is to prevent future slaughters

of Syrian children and other innocents whether by chemical or more traditional weapons the only answer is to hammer out some new power-sharing arrangements inside Syria through negotiations.

Even if peace talks might not immediately resolve the conflict, they would at least test how serious Assad is about making meaningful concessions to his opponents. That, in turn, could give the Obama administration more leverage with Russia, if Assad proves to be inflexible. Russia might tire of its support of the long-running Assad dynasty.

Indeed, it's hard to see a downside for Washington from negotiations unless it's the fear that the rebels will reveal themselves to be essentially a front for al-Qaeda, with the more palatable political leaders exposed as empty suits with no real authority. Still, it might be better for the West to know that now rather than later.

Obama at a Crossroads

Yet, as President Obama stands poised at a crossroads of what would even with congressional approval amount to a unilateral U.S. attack on Syria in violation of international law, his other option is to demand that all sides in the civil war make a concerted effort to negotiate a cease-fire and a new power-sharing structure.

That would require the Obama administration to read the Riot Act not only to the Syrian rebels but to their patrons and sympathizers in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states and, to a degree, Israel.

Rather than let the Syrian rebels act like the tail wagging the American dog, Obama would have to make clear to them that their continued obstruction of peace talks is unacceptable. He could tell the rebels and their patrons that there will be no U.S. involvement unless he sees a good-faith effort from the rebels for peace.

Instead, there's the spectacle of Secretary of State John Kerry pleading with the rebels for their understanding after Obama's decision to hold off on missile strikes pending congressional approval. According to the New York Times, Kerry called Ahmed al-Jarba, the president of the Syrian opposition, to explain Obama's postponement. Kerry also consulted with Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, State Department officials told the Times.

Jarba is the same man who blocked the most recent initiative for peace talks in July, laying down new obstacles to negotiations. On July 31, Ben Hubbard of the New York Times reported that "the new conditions, made by [Jarba] reflected a significant hardening of his position. He said that the opposition would not

negotiate with President Bashar al-Assad or 'his clique' and that talks could begin only when the military situation in Syria was positive for rebel forces."

After Obama's announcement of the missile-strike postponement on Saturday, some Syrian rebels openly complained about the delay as well as his insistence that the attacks be "limited, tailored" to punish Assad's government for allegedly using chemical weapons but not be so expansive that they enmesh the United States in another war.

The Times reported on Sunday that "Obama's change in direction left some opposition officials disillusioned. Some rebel officials said that the president's continued insistence that any strike would be limited in duration and scope had prompted worries that if an attack eventually came, it would not deliver a powerful enough blow to the Syrian government's forces."

The Times quoted Maj. Isam Rayes, an official who works for the Supreme Military Council, the armed wing of the opposition, as saying: "I think that it will not be strong enough."

Supplicant or Superpower?

Yet, what is an American to make of the U.S. Secretary of State, in effect, apologizing to Syrian rebels and Saudi officials for not rushing into an act of war against a country that poses no threat to the United States, especially when the Syrian rebels and the Saudis refuse to take even a tentative step toward peace.

Who is the superpower here? Who is giving the orders? Are the Saudis and their new-found allies, the Israelis, demanding that the United States intervene militarily in what is shaping up as a regional power struggle between the Saudi-Israeli coalition and Iran and its Shiite allies, including Assad's regime?

The behind-the-scenes roles of the sophisticated intelligence agencies of Saudi Arabia and Israel also might demand a more careful examination of the evidence regarding the alleged Aug. 21 chemical attacks in the Damascus suburbs which provoked the threatened U.S. military strike.

Given the powerful interests seeking to pull the United States into the war, the possibility of a "black op" cannot be dismissed out of hand. Though the Obama administration insists that the evidence implicating Assad's military is clear, not a single piece of hard evidence has been made public and much of the still-secret case may come from Israeli intelligence sources.

Still, the most obvious point is that as long as the Syrian civil war drags on, there is an inevitability of more civilian deaths, including some from the

expected American strike. There is also the prospect for a widening conflict that could include retaliatory attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets.

In other words, the killing could easily spin out of control, much as happened because of the Iraq War and other past U.S. military interventions in the Middle East. The only way to avert this catastrophe would be to initiate peace talks, starting with a cease-fire and leading to a new power-sharing arrangement inside Syria.

But that will require the Obama administration thinking less about missile strikes and more about how to compel the Syrian rebels to send a negotiating team to Geneva.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click here.
