

How War on Syria Lost Its Way

Exclusive: What looked like another U.S. march to war in the Mideast has turned toward a peaceful accord that carries hope of getting Syria to relinquish its chemical weapons and achieving a cease-fire, maybe even an end to the civil war. But some want to resume the drive toward a U.S. attack, ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern says.

By Ray McGovern

The just announced U.S.-Russia agreement in Geneva on a “joint determination to ensure the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons (CW) program in the soonest and safest manner” sounds the death knell to an attempt by Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia to get the U.S. into the war in Syria.

Equally important, it greatly increases the prospect of further U.S.-Russia cooperation to tamp down escalating violence in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. That the two sides were able to hammer out in three days a detailed agreement on such highly delicate, complicated issues is little short of a miracle. I cannot remember seeing the likes of it in 50 years in Washington.

Just two short weeks ago, the prospect of a U.S. military strike against Syria looked like a done deal with Official Washington abuzz with excitement about cruise missiles being launched from American warships in the Mediterranean, flying low toward their targets and lighting up the night sky of Damascus like the “shock and awe” pyrotechnics did to Baghdad in 2003.

On Aug. 30, Secretary of State John Kerry seemed to seal the deal with an impassioned address that declared some 35 times that “we know” Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had crossed President Barack Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons with an Aug. 21 attack and needed to be punished.

Along with Kerry’s speech, the White House released a four-page “Government Assessment” declaring with “high confidence” that Assad’s regime was guilty of the attack on a Damascus suburb that killed precisely “1,429” people and “at least 426 children.” Though the white paper included not a single verifiable fact establishing Assad’s guilt nor did it explain where its casualty figures came from the assessment was accepted as true by most of the mainstream U.S. news media.

At that moment, Israel and its many backers had every reason to believe they had won the day and that at least the first stage of the retribution would be delivered before President Barack Obama flew off on Sept. 3 to Europe and to the

G-20 summit. But then came a series of disappointments for them, beginning with Obama's abrupt Aug. 31 decision to seek congressional authorization.

Still, the prevailing attitude was that the Israel Lobby would simply get to work whipping members of Congress into line with a variety of arguments (and a mix of threats and inducements) to ensure that a use-of-force resolution was passed and sent to the President's desk.

The confidence was so high that there was no need to disguise what was afoot. Usually the mainstream media avoids mentioning the extraordinary influence of the Israel Lobby on Congress, but this time the *New York Times* displayed unusual candor describing who was egging on the march to war.

An 800-Pound Gorilla

In an article posted online Sept. 2, the Times reported, "Administration officials said the influential pro-Israel lobby group Aipac was already at work pressing for military action against the government of Mr. Assad. ... One administration official, who, like others, declined to be identified discussing White House strategy, called Aipac 'the 800-pound gorilla in the room,' and said its allies in Congress had to be saying, 'If the White House is not capable of enforcing this red line' against the catastrophic use of chemical weapons, 'we're in trouble.'"

This warning about "loss of credibility" is a familiar one, artfully promoted in Saturday's Wall Street Journal in [an article](#) by Leon Aron titled "America, Syria and the World." Aron quotes a long list of Israel loyalists like Brookings Saban Center's Kenneth M. Pollack, who warn that foreigners may come to view us as wimps if strong action is not taken against Syria.

A contrary point of view was expressed by former U.S. Ambassador Chas Freeman, who commented: "There is another possibility, however. And that is that they have come to see us as bullies, prone to resort to force rather than diplomacy when problems arise. The latter possibility puts a whole different face on Obama's hesitation to go to war with Syria."

In any case, to the surprise of many Washington insiders, the dreams of U.S. bombs raining down on another Mideast country began to slip away as many members of Congress listened to their constituents speaking out against war, and some even disbelieving the administration's assessment because no hard, checkable evidence was being revealed to the American people.

Morose at CNN

As the march toward war began meandering off in unexpected directions, I was

lucky enough to observe, up-close and personal, the angry reaction of some of Israel's top American supporters on Monday evening. That was after Russia drew Obama a new map for how to reach the desired destination of removing chemical weapons from Assad's arsenal without going to war.

After doing an interview on CNN International, I opened the studio door and almost knocked over a small fellow named Paul Wolfowitz, President George W. Bush's former under-secretary of defense who in 2002-2003 had helped craft the fraudulent case for invading Iraq. And there standing next to him was former Sen. Joe Lieberman, the neocon from Connecticut who was a leading advocate for the Iraq War and pretty much every other potential war in the Middle East.

Finding myself in the same room with two gentlemen responsible for so much misery in the world, I fell back on my recent training in non-violence, as we watched Piers Morgan try earnestly to spin the day's astounding events. On the tube earlier, Anderson Cooper sought counsel from Ari Fleischer, former spokesman for George W. Bush, and David Gergen, long-time White House PR guru.

Fleischer and Gergen were alternately downright furious over the Russian initiative to give peace a chance and disconsolate at seeing the prospect for U.S. military involvement in Syria disappear when we were oh so close. After some caustic and condescending outbursts, an almost surreally disconsolate mood set in. It looked like these fellas were not going to get their war.

Later remarks by Lieberman and Wolfowitz reflected a distinctly funereal atmosphere. I felt I had come to a wake with somberly dressed folks (no pastel ties this time) grieving for a recently, dearly-departed war.

Among Lieberman's vapid comments was the hope-against-hope assertion that President Obama, of course, could still commit troops to war without congressional authorization. I thought to myself, wow, here's a fellow who was a senator for 24 years and almost our vice president, and he does not remember that the Founders gave Congress the sole power to declare war in Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution.

So I dug into my back pocket, pulled out my little copy of the Constitution, and carefully tore out Article 1. Then I lurked in the ornate elevator waiting area for Joe and Paul to come out. After the usual pleasantries (all politicians feel compelled to "remember" you once you say your name as though they should), I said, "Joe, I couldn't believe what you said about the President not being required to get the approval of Congress before attacking a country like Syria. So, here; I tore out Article 1 of the Constitution for you; I have another copy, so you can keep it. Go home, read it, and see if what you just said is correct."

It was a bad evening for war and for those pundits who like to joke about “giving war a chance.” For those of us who think war is not such a good idea and truly should only be considered as an absolutely last resort it was an uncommon day for rejoicing at the failure of the warmongers to again send young men and women to kill folks who pose no threat to us.

Salt in the Wounds

As sad as the war proponents were including the cable news channels cheated out of some great video of flashing bombs illuminating the shattered buildings of ancient Damascus they would face another humiliation in reading Thursday's *New York Times*, which published an op-ed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. He made sensible points about the value of international law prohibiting one country from attacking another except in self-defense or with approval of the United Nations Security Council.

Sen. Bob Menendez, D-New Jersey, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee and an Israeli favorite, spoke for many Washington insiders by saying, “I was at dinner, and I almost wanted to vomit.” [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's [“Rewarding ‘Group Think’ on Syria.”](#)]

Menendez had just cobbled together and forced through his committee a resolution, 10-to-7, to authorize the President to strike Syria with enough force to degrade Assad's military. Now, at Obama's request, the resolution was being put on the shelf.

Events were now moving swiftly away from a U.S. missile strike. Obama dispatched Kerry to Geneva to work out an agreement with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. But the hope for war still was not fully extinguished.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was still rooting for a chance to revive the military option and like Lieberman suggesting that the President didn't really need congressional approval and shouldn't be deterred by popular opposition either.

At a breakfast session with reporters on Sept. 11, Levin said, “I just don't think you can be guided, when it comes to this kind of an issue, by public opinion polls. ... It would not be a surprise at all to me, even if there were no congressional authority, that he [Obama] would use his Article 2 authority” as commander in chief. (Not incidentally, Levin has been the recipient of more money from AIPAC-related organizations than any other member of Congress.)

At this point, Israel and its lobby had every reason to be disappointed in another longtime close friend, John Kerry. He had succeeded in driving the war, which was to be fought over Obama's “red line,” into what football fans might

call the “red zone” but Kerry was unable to push the plan for missile strikes over the goal line.

Instead, Kerry clearly is under new orders from President Obama to figure out a way in cooperation with Minister Lavrov to defuse the crisis. Putin, Obama, Lavrov and Kerry have just won some laurels from the people around the world hoping to advance the cause of peace. But they won't have the luxury of resting on them, while so many others in and around Syria have powerful incentives to reverse the progress made.

One still has to wonder what might revive prospects for U.S. missile strikes. Some in the Middle East are worried about the possibility that radical jihadists among the Syrian rebels might try to derail peace talks by launching a chemical weapons attack against Israeli targets with the hope that the provocation will be blamed on the Assad regime and set off a rush to retaliate.

Whether likely or not, it is a threat that the cooler heads in the Obama administration should anticipate and be ready to head off.

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