

Obama at a Crossroad of War or Peace

Exclusive: The dramatic spread of Sunni extremism into the heart of Iraq may force President Obama to finally make a choice between simply extending a slightly less violent Bush Doctrine and charting his own innovative course in the name of peace, Robert Parry writes.

By Robert Parry

Barack Obama is at a crossroads of his presidency: one path leads to heightened conflicts favored by Official Washington's neoconservatives and liberal interventionists; the other requires cooperation with past adversaries, such as Russia and Iran, in the cause of peace.

For the first five-plus years of his administration, Obama has sought to straddle this divide, maintaining traditional U.S. alliances that have pushed for Washington's violent interference in the affairs of other countries, particularly in the Middle East, but also collaborating behind the scenes with Russia to ease some tensions.

But the days of such splitting the difference are ending. Obama will soon have to decide to either stand up to the still influential neocons as well as hawks in his own administration and seek help from Russia and Iran to resolve conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere – or join the neocon warpath against Russia, Iran and Syria.

The first option would mean breaking with old allies, including the Saudi monarchy and Israel's Likud government, and rejecting their view that Iran and the so-called "Shiite crescent" from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut represent the greatest threat to U.S. and their own interests in the Middle East.

This departure from the old ways would require realistic negotiations over the Syrian civil war, accepting the continued rule of President Bashar al-Assad at least for the near future; reaching an agreement over Iran's nuclear program; and resolving the Ukraine crisis in a way that addresses Russia's security concerns, including accepting Crimea's decision to rejoin Russia, agreeing to a federated structure for Ukraine and keeping Ukraine out of NATO.

Sticking to the other route would follow the interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel into new conflicts: deeper intervention in Syria's civil war with the goal of overthrowing Assad; rejection of Iran's offers to compromise on its nuclear program; and intensified confrontation with Russia over Ukraine.

This “tough-guy-ism” would surely make Official Washington’s pundits and pols happy. They could boast about American resolve in support of “freedom” and “human rights” – even if it led to worse tyranny, mass killings and economic pain.

For instance, the worsening crisis in Ukraine could be expected to make life even more miserable for Ukrainians while also possibly disrupting gas supplies to Europe, throwing the Continent back into recession and likely stunting U.S. economic growth, too.

Plus, stepped-up U.S. intervention in Syria, such as sending more sophisticated weapons to the supposedly “moderate opposition” and possibly conducting American airstrikes to degrade Assad’s military, might instead tip the balance toward victory by Sunni extremists allied with al-Qaeda, which might force a direct U.S. military intervention.

Feeding the flames of the region’s Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflicts also would likely increase the death and destruction in Iraq, worsening that tragic country’s agony while also disrupting oil production which would further damage the world’s economy.

By rejecting Iran’s proposals for constraining but not eliminating its nuclear program, the Obama administration would please Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi King Abdullah, especially if it were followed by U.S. airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

But most likely a new war in Iran would just get lots of Iranians killed and further enflame the hatreds across the Middle East, including at the United States through new acts of international terrorism. Any acts of terrorism would, naturally, strengthen American “resolve” to kill more Middle Easterners.

Beyond the human misery in the region from all this violence, there would be an extreme economic cost on the West comparable to the damage done by George W. Bush’s Iraq War, which deepened the U.S. debt by \$1 trillion or more and contributed to the financial crisis of 2008 which cost millions of Americans and Europeans their jobs and homes.

More of these economic dislocations could be expected if Obama pursues the neocon-preferred course of ever-wider confrontations. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Why Neocons Seek to Destabilize Russia.”](#)]

Weakening America

So, the path of heightened confrontations might inspire a sense of moral righteousness as the United States mows down “enemies” across the Middle East

and gives a “bloody nose” to Russia over Ukraine. But it also might accelerate the overall decline in America’s world standing by bringing more ruin on the U.S. economy, the country’s greatest strength.

Taking this “tough-guy” route also would likely not resolve anything in the long term anymore than Bush’s invasion did in Iraq or Obama’s bombing campaign did in Libya. Those operations removed dictators Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya but they also unleashed sectarian and political havoc inside those two countries.

Neocon “regime change” in Syria or Iran even if “successful” would surely have devastating consequences for those two societies beyond even their current unpleasant circumstances.

So far, the limited U.S. intervention in Syria supplying the alleged “moderates” with light weapons and Obama’s demand that “Assad must go” – has only exacerbated the civil war and created more opportunities to be exploited by the radical jihadists in al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda’s affiliate) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (a group so extreme that even al-Qaeda renounced it).

The neocon solution to the Syrian crisis has been to demand that Obama supply the “moderates” with more advanced weapons and undertake an aerial bombing campaign to destroy Assad’s military capabilities. The most likely outcome of that approach, however, would be either an outright extremist victory or bloody anarchy.

Regarding Russia, the neocons seek growing tensions between Moscow and Washington, with the Ukraine crisis serving as the biggest irritant and with follow-on plans for destabilizing Russia politically and economically, eventually to get rid of President Vladimir Putin in favor of a compliant leader like Boris Yeltsin who let “free-market” experts plunder Russia’s economy in the decade after the Soviet Union’s collapse.

As neocon National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman wrote last September in a Washington Post op-ed, Ukraine has become “the biggest prize.” But Gershman added that Ukraine was really only an interim step to an even bigger prize, the removal of Putin, who, Gershman added, “may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad [i.e. Ukraine] but within Russia itself.”

Of course, Gershman and other neocons ignore the risks of creating violent disorder in nuclear-armed Russia, transforming it into something like a giant-sized Ukraine. The end result of that “regime change” could be thermo-nuclear war.

The Peaceful Path

Without doubt, Official Washington would find the more peaceful path less gratifying, with its pursuit of imperfect compromises reached with adversaries who have been thoroughly vilified in the mainstream U.S. media. Indeed, there would be much moral outrage over any suggestion that these “enemies” have their own legitimate concerns or that they can make significant contributions toward a less violent world.

But that is the choice facing Obama: Can he get off his moral high horse and recognize that Putin is not entirely in the wrong about Ukraine, that the European Union and the U.S. State Department helped provoke a political crisis in Kiev which led to the violent overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich; that most residents of Crimea did want to secede from the ensuing chaos and rejoin Russia; that Moscow has reasonable fears about NATO pressed against its borders; that Russian-speaking Ukrainians should have rights, too, and not just be slaughtered as “terrorists” for resisting the right-wing overthrow of Yanukovich whose political base was in their eastern territories.

Theoretically, a compromise solution to the Ukraine crisis would be relatively easy: a second referendum on Crimea’s secession to verify that the earlier vote reflected the popular will (with plenty of international observers); a federalized system to grant significant self-rule to eastern Ukraine; an agreement to stop further expansion of NATO; and resumed economic ties between Ukraine and Russia.

Once the Ukraine crisis is in the past, Obama could shift from ostracizing Putin to enlisting him as a partner in reaching a reasonable settlement with Iran to guarantee that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only and in finding a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

Based on the recent Syrian election, Assad appears to retain the allegiance of many Alawites, Shiites, Christians and other sects, including some Sunnis. If Obama backs off his insistence that “Assad must go,” then a power-sharing arrangement could be within reach with Assad staying through some transition period.

A political settlement would allow the Syrian government to concentrate on driving foreign jihadists and other violent extremists out of its territory. If the jihadists could be defeated in Syria, the stability of neighboring Iraq would be enhanced.

Pressure on the Saudis

However, ultimately the defeat of Sunni radicals whether al-Nusra or ISIS or al-

Qaeda will require cracking down on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and other Persian Gulf states that have poured fortunes into financing and arming these extremists.

The Saudis, in particular, have backed the jihadists swarming into Syria with the goal of overthrowing Assad, an Alawite, a Shiite-related sect. The Saudis see Assad as an important ally of Shiite-ruled Iran and thus their geopolitical enemy. But only the United States and the West can apply the necessary financial pressure to get Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states to relent in their strategy of supporting Sunni terrorism.

For Obama to challenge Saudi Arabia would require true political courage since Official Washington has long embraced the reactionary Saudi monarchy as “moderates” who have provided a steady supply of oil in exchange for U.S. protection. But the Saudis have abused their “untouchable” status by funding extremists either directly from government coffers or through various princes.

As the Washington Post reported on June 13, “citizens in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have quietly funneled vast sums of money to and joined the ranks of ISIS and other jihadist groups fighting Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria over the past two years, analysts and U.S. officials have said.”

In recent weeks, ISIS facing pressure from the Syrian army and jihadist rivals in al-Nusra marched back into Iraq, where the group was founded as a reaction to Bush’s 2003 invasion, and routed several divisions of the Iraqi army. ISIS captured a number of major cities and moved to within some 30 miles of Baghdad before encountering stiffer resistance from the Shiite-dominated army and Shiite militias.

The ISIS offensive prompted Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, to publicly denounce Saudi and Qatari leaders and accuse them of supporting “genocide” by unleashing terror groups to kill Shiites and to destroy Shiite religious sites.

“They are attacking Iraq, through Syria and in a direct way, and they announced war on Iraq, as they announced it on Syria, and unfortunately it is on a sectarian and political basis,” Maliki said. “These two countries are primarily responsible for the sectarian and terrorist and security crisis of Iraq.”

Though the Obama administration and many U.S. journalists are aware of the accuracy of Maliki’s claims, the reporting on it in the New York Times is instructive about the obstacles that Obama faces both within the U.S. news media and his own administration.

On Wednesday, at the end of a long article on the Iraq crisis, the Times mocked

Maliki's complaint as an attempt to shift blame, an attitude echoed by the U.S. State Department:

"The Iraqi government issued a statement accusing Saudi Arabia of funding the Sunni extremists, as Mr. Maliki continued to offer explanations for the stunning success of the Sunni extremists that do not focus on his leadership. The statement drew almost immediate criticism from the United States, with Jen Psaki, the State Department spokeswoman, describing it as inaccurate and 'offensive.'"

So, rather than put pressure on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states about their terrorist funding, a spokesperson for the Obama administration pretended that this reality didn't exist. (I'm told the Iraqi government recently captured an ISIS militant who has given details about the sources of Saudi funding and that information has been passed on to the CIA.)

Israeli Obstruction

Yet, as touchy as it is for the U.S. government to face down the oil-rich Saudis, it is even harder to confront the other end of the anti-Iran axis, the Israeli government.

If Obama were to venture down the road toward realigning U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East, he might find that he has little choice but to finally demand that Israel resolve its longstanding conflict with the Palestinians.

Indeed, with Putin's cooperation, Obama could threaten to seek a United Nations protection force for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza if Israel doesn't agree to either accept a viable Palestinian state or transform Israel and Palestine into a single state in which all citizens have equal rights under a constitution.

Such pressure would infuriate Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israel's powerful lobby in Washington not to mention the neocons but it would lance a long-festering boil and remove a principal recruiting tool for Islamic extremism. A unified Israeli/Palestinian state with equal rights for all could also open the way for Muslim states to extend full recognition to this new entity while protecting the rights of Jews, Muslims and Christians.

If Barack Obama could find the political courage to take on these daunting challenges in a realistic and imaginative way, he might finally earn that Nobel Peace Prize that he received at the start of his presidency.

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](#).
