

Blocking a 'Realist' Strategy on the Mideast

Exclusive: Official Washington's influential neocons appear back in the driver's seat steering U.S. policy in the Middle East toward a wider conflict in Syria and away from a "realist" alternative that sought a Putin-Obama collaboration to resolve the region's crises more peacefully, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Just last month President Barack Obama dismissed the idea of arming "moderate" rebels in Syria as a "fantasy" that was "never in the cards" as a workable strategy, but now this scheme has been dealt back into the middle of the U.S. war against the Islamic State, winning approval from solid majorities in Congress.

Perhaps the only explanation for this apparent folly is that this implausible notion retains overwhelming support among Washington's political/pundit class because it creates the appearance of being "tough" and "doing something" allowing politicians to pretend to address a problem even if the approach might make matters much worse.

There's also the other finicky little problem that the action of arming and training rebels and unleashing them against a sovereign state like Syria is an act of aggression (if not terrorism depending on what they do), similar to what U.S. officials have piously condemned the Russians of doing in Ukraine.

But this hypocrisy is never acknowledged either by U.S. policymakers or the mainstream U.S. press, which has gone into Cold War hysterics over Moscow's alleged support for embattled ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine on Russia's border – while demanding that Obama expand support for Syrian rebels halfway around the world, even though many of those "moderates" have allied themselves with al-Qaeda terrorists.

In a sense, this hypocrisy is nothing new. During much of Syria's three-year civil war, the Obama administration has been covertly supporting the rebels with light weapons and military training while other U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states, have funneled huge sums of money to the cause of overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad's relatively secular government. Assad has been a longtime "regime change" target of American neoconservatives and Israel.

Though it's been known for quite awhile that the Syrian civil war had degenerated into a sectarian conflict with mostly Sunni rebels battling the

Alawites, Shiites, Christians and other minorities who form the base of support for Assad, the fiction has been maintained in Washington that a viable and secular “moderate opposition” to Assad still exists.

The reality on the ground says otherwise. For instance, in Friday’s New York Times, [an article](#) by correspondent Ben Hubbard described the supposed Syrian “moderates” who are receiving CIA support as “a beleaguered lot, far from becoming a force that can take on the fanatical and seasoned fighters of the Islamic State.”

But the situation is arguably worse than just the weakness of these “moderates.” According to Hubbard’s reporting, some of these U.S.-backed fighters “acknowledge that battlefield necessity had put them in the trenches with the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, an issue of obvious concern for the United States.

“Lt. Col. Fares al-Bayyoush, the former aviation engineer who now heads the Fursan al-Haq Brigade, acknowledged that his men had fought alongside the Nusra Front because they needed all the help they could get.

“Sometimes, he said, that help comes in forms only a jihadi group can provide. He cited the rebel takeover of the northern town of Khan Sheikhoun, saying that the rebels were unable to take out one government position until the Nusra Front sent a suicide bomber to blow it up. In another town nearby, Nusra sent four bombers, including [an American citizen](#).

“‘We encourage them actually,’ Mr. Bayyoush said with a laugh. ‘And if they need vehicles, we provide them’.”

An Al-Qaeda Victory?

The “moderate” rebels also don’t share President Obama’s priority of carrying the fight to the Islamic State militants, reported Hubbard, “ousting Mr. Assad remains their primary goal.”

This dilemma of the mixed allegiances of the “moderates” has been apparent for at least the past year. Last September, many of the previously hailed Syrian “moderate” rebels unveiled themselves to be Islamists who repudiated the U.S.-backed political opposition and allied themselves with al-Qaeda’s al-Nusra Front. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Syrian Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda.”](#)]

In other words, the just-approved congressional action opening the floodgates to hundreds of millions of dollars more in military aid to Syrian “moderates” could actually contribute to al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate gaining control of Syria, which could create a far greater threat to U.S. national security than the

consolidation of the Islamic State inside territory of Syria and Iraq.

While the Islamic State brandishes its brutality as a gruesome tactic for driving Western interests out of the Middle East, it has shown no particular interest in taking its battle into the West. By contrast, al-Qaeda follows a conscious strategy of inflicting terrorist attacks on the West as part of a long-term plan to wreck the economies of the United States and Europe.

Thus, Obama's hastily approved strategy for investing more in Syrian "moderates" if it allows a continued spillover of U.S. military equipment to al-Nusra could increase the chances of creating a base for international terrorism in Damascus at the heart of the Middle East. That would surely prompt demands for a reintroduction of U.S. ground troops into the region.

There are also obvious alternatives to following such a self-destructive course, although they would require Obama and much of Official Washington to climb down from their collective high horses and deal with such demonized leaders as Syria's Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin, not to mention Iran.

A "realist" strategy would seek out a realistic political solution to the Syrian conflict, which would mean accepting the continuation of Assad's rule, at least for the near term, as part of a coalition government that would offer stronger Sunni representation. This unity government could then focus on eliminating remaining pockets of al-Qaeda and Islamic State resistance before holding new elections across as much of the country as possible.

As part of this strategy to weaken these Islamic extremists, the United States and the European Union would have to crack down on the militants' funding sources in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, as touchy as that can be with the Saudis holding such influence over the U.S. economy. But Obama could start the process of facing down Saudi blackmail by declassifying the secret section of the 9/11 Report which reportedly describes Saudi financing of al-Qaeda before the 9/11 attacks.

I'm told that U.S. intelligence now has a clear picture of which Saudi princes are providing money to Islamist terrorists. So, instead of simply sending drones and warplanes after youthful jihadist warriors, the Obama administration might find it more useful to shut down these funders, perhaps nominating these princes as candidates for the U.S. "capture or kill list."

Getting Russian Help

To get Assad fully onboard for the necessary concessions to his Sunni opponents, the Russians could prove extremely valuable. According to [a source briefed on recent developments](#), Russian intelligence already has served as a go-between for

U.S. intelligence to secure Assad's acceptance of Obama's plan to send warplanes into parts of Syrian territory to attack Islamic State targets.

The Russians also proved helpful a year ago in getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal to defuse a U.S. threat to begin bombing Assad's military in retaliation for a Sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. Although Assad denied involvement and subsequent evidence pointed more toward a provocation by rebel extremists Putin's intervention gave Obama a major foreign policy success without a U.S. military strike.

That intervention, however, infuriated Syrian rebels who had planned to time a military offensive with the U.S. bombing campaign, hoping to topple Assad's government and take power in Damascus. America's influential neoconservatives and their "liberal interventionist" allies along with Israeli officials were also livid, all eager for another U.S.-backed "regime change" in the Middle East.

Putin thus made himself an inviting neocon target. By the end of last September, American neocons were taking aim at Ukraine as a key vulnerability for Putin. A leading neocon, Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, took to the op-ed pages of the neocon Washington Post to identify Ukraine as "the biggest prize" and explain how its targeting could undermine Putin's political standing inside Russia.

"Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents," Gershman wrote. "Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself." At the time, Gershman's NED was funding scores of political and media projects inside Ukraine.

What followed in Ukraine had all the earmarks of a U.S. destabilization campaign against Putin's ally, the elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Behind the scenes was U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, a neocon holdover who had been an adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney and who is married to prominent neocon Robert Kagan. Nuland was caught in an intercepted phone conversation with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt handpicking the leaders of the new regime, which took power after Yanukovich was overthrown in a Feb. 22 coup.

Then, with U.S. officialdom and the mainstream U.S. press engaging in an orgy of Cold War-style propaganda, Putin was demonized as a new Hitler expanding territory by force. Anyone who knew the facts recognized that Putin had actually been trying to maintain the status quo, i.e., sustain the Yanukovich government until the next election, and it was the West that had thrown the first punch.

But Washington's new "group think" was that Putin instigated the Ukraine crisis so he could reclaim lost territory of the Russian empire.

President Obama seemed caught off-guard by the Ukraine crisis, but was soon swept up in the West's Putin/Russia bashing. He joined in the hysteria despite the damage that the Ukraine confrontation was inflicting on Obama's own hopes of working with Putin to resolve other Middle East problems.

Thus, the initial victory went to the neocons who had astutely recognized that the emerging Putin-Obama collaboration represented a serious threat to their continued plans for "regime change" across the Middle East. Not only had Putin helped Obama head off the military strike on Syria, but Putin assisted in getting Iran to agree to limits on its nuclear program.

That meant the neocon desire for more "shock and awe" bombing in Syria and Iran had to be further postponed. The Putin-Obama cooperation might have presented an even greater threat to neocon plans if the two leaders could have teamed up to pressure Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to finally reach a reasonable agreement with the Palestinians.

At the center of the neocons' strategy at least since the mid-1990s has been the idea that "regime change" in Middle East governments hostile to Israel would eventually starve Israel's close-in enemies, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestine's Hamas, of support and free Israel's hand to do what it wanted with the Palestinians. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

The Putin-Obama collaboration if allowed to mature could have derailed that core neocon strategy and denied Israel the unilateral power to decide the Palestinians' fate. But the Ukraine crisis and now the plan to pour a half-billion dollars into the Syrian rebels fighting Assad have put the neocon strategy back on track.

The next question is whether Obama and whatever "realists" remain in Official Washington have the will and the determination to reclaim control of the Middle East policy train and take it in a different direction.

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](#).

