

Obama's Strategic Shift

Exclusive: President Obama has belatedly detected the looming catastrophe in Syria and Iraq as Sunni terrorists gain ground. He also grasps the need for Russian and Iranian help. But his administration remains infested with neocons and liberal war hawks who could sabotage the needed deals, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It's finally dawning on President Barack Obama the grave dangers that have been created for the American Republic by decades of neoconservative dominance of U.S. foreign policy, but his moves in response to this dire threat remain hesitant and indecisive.

The only game-saving play open to Obama now in response to recent Saudi-backed escalation of Sunni extremism in Syria and Iraq as well the new right-wing racist government in Israel may be to forge an alliance with Iran and Russia as a counterforce in the Middle East that could save Syria's relatively secular regime and reverse gains by the Islamic State inside Iraq.

That, however, would require Obama finally taking control of his foreign policy and throwing out or at least sidelining many of the neocons and "liberal interventionists" whom he has tolerated and promoted. It's difficult to see how the likes of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power would fall in line behind the necessary moves to build such a pragmatic alliance.

Power has been a top advocate for "regime change" in Syria, wanting to wage an air war against the government of Bashar al-Assad even if destroying his military would risk opening the gates of Damascus to the Islamic State and/or al-Qaeda's Nusra Front. Power has promoted some of the most extreme and dubious propaganda against Assad, such as blaming him for the mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Despite serious doubts that Assad's regime had anything to do with the attack, Power along with other "liberal interventionists" and neocons pumped for U.S. military retaliation that would have devastated Assad's army, which has been the only significant obstacle to victory by Sunni extremists. Power, a foreign policy adviser to Obama since the 2008 campaign, remains an anti-Assad hardliner.

The ever-influential neocons also have long pined for "regime change" in Syria. It was part of their early scheming in support of Israel's hard-line strategies in the 1990s and though the Syrian goal took a back seat to "regime change" in

Iraq in 2003 it was still high on the agenda. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

After the August 2013 sarin attack, the neocons thought their dream of ousting the Assads was finally coming true, so they were bitterly disappointed when President Obama cooperated with Russian President Vladimir Putin in finding a way away from war, getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal (while still denying any role in the Aug. 21, 2013 attack).

Putin and Obama also teamed up to get Iran to the negotiating table regarding its nuclear program, thwarting another neocon hope to "bomb-bomb-bomb Iran" and achieve "regime change" in Tehran, too. After those two untimely interventions for peace, Putin rose to the top of the neocon enemies list.

That's where Secretary Nuland came in, a neocon holdover who had been an adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney and wife of arch-neocon Robert Kagan, a founder in 1998 of the let's-invade-Iraq Project for the New American Century. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

By late 2013 and early 2014, Nuland was encouraging political disruptions in Ukraine and making plans for a "regime change" on Russia's border. In early February 2014, she was overheard handpicking Ukraine's future leaders. "Yats is the guy," she said about then-opposition figure Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

With the crucial help of western Ukraine's neo-Nazi militias and other right-wing extremists, the coup ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014, and Nuland's favorite Yatsenyuk was quickly installed as the new prime minister. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[When Is a Putsch a Putsch.](#)"]

Demonizing Putin

The Kiev coup provoked Putin into supporting the secession of Crimea, an ethnic Russian stronghold and home of Russia's Black Sea fleet at Sevastopol. Though overwhelmingly popular on the peninsula, Crimea's decision to secede and rejoin Russia was denounced by the mainstream U.S. media as a "Russian invasion," despite the fact that Russian troops were already in Crimea under the Sevastopol basing agreement.

When ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, who had voted heavily for Yanukovich, also resisted the new right-wing order in Kiev, they were decried as "terrorists" and became the target of a U.S.-backed military offensive seeking to crush their demands for autonomy or separation. Again, neo-Nazi and other right-wing militias took the lead in slaughtering thousands of ethnic Russians. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.](#)"]

However, in the U.S. media, influential neocons and liberal interventionists made sure there was an unrelenting barrage of anti-Russian propaganda to keep the American public in line. Putin was elevated into the top tiers of designated demons and even Obama joined in the Putin-bashing.

Meanwhile, in the Middle East, Israel and Saudi Arabia were finding common cause in their mutual hatred of Shiite-ruled Iran and its allies. As part of the Sunni regional war against the Shiites, the Saudis and other Gulf states covertly slipped money and other assistance to al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Syria, while Israel developed what amounted to a non-aggression pact with Nusra along the Golan Heights, even launching airstrikes against Lebanese Hezbollah fighters who were helping Assad battle these Sunni extremists.

Obama dared not challenge Official Washington's conventional wisdom about the need to oust Assad (in favor of the fictional Syrian "moderates") and punish Putin over Ukraine (through harsh economic sanctions and political isolation). But the situation in Syria and Iraq began to reach a deadly crisis point. In mid-2014, Islamic State fighters spilled into Iraq, routing the U.S.-trained Iraqi army and seizing major cities, including Mosul.

Even as he muffled his voice to avoid offending the dominant neocon narratives, Obama understood how delusional the views of Official Washington were. In August 2014, he confided to New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman that the notion of arming Syrian moderates as an effective fighting force against Assad was "always a fantasy."

But it was a beloved fantasy in Official Washington. As Saudi and other Gulf sheiks increased support for Syria's Sunni extremists and those forces began to seize major cities Washington Post editors and other prominent neocons foisted the blame on Obama for not having imposed "regime change" in Syria earlier, as if destroying Assad's army would have prevented al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State from crushing the few "moderates" and filling the power void.

In the last few months, al-Qaeda's Nusra as a lead force in the new Saudi-engineered Sunni coalition called the Army of Conquest has been making big gains inside Syria. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's spin-off, the hyper-brutal Islamic State, recently captured Iraq's Ramadi and on Wednesday overran Syria's ancient city of Palmyra, endangering not only the city's inhabitants but its ancient ruins.

Belatedly, Obama has roused to the impending threat that these extremists pose not just to the Middle East but to the West. The prospect of the black flag of Sunni terrorism flying over Damascus or even Baghdad could force the United States into a catastrophic decision to reintroduce a large military force into the region, which was initially destabilized by the neocon-driven U.S. invasion

of Iraq in 2003.

Though such a move by Obama or his successor might be politically unavoidable, the consequences would surely be disastrous, with the chances for a meaningful victory slim to none while further bankrupting and militarizing the United States. The endless war could extinguish the last embers of the American Republic. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Day After Damascus Falls](#)" and "[Losing the American Republic](#)."]]

Turning to Putin

These realizations along with the growing recognition that the U.S.-backed Kiev regime is both corrupt and veering further into the fringes of violent ultra-nationalism and neo-Nazism have caused Obama to reconsider some of the Russia-bashing that he opportunistically joined over the past year, including his boast during his State of the Union address that he had helped put Russia's economy into "tatters."

The shift in the tide was noticeable when Obama dispatched Secretary of State John Kerry to Sochi, Russia, on May 12 to hold face-to-face meetings with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President Putin. Kerry's tone was markedly less hostile than it had been over the previous year. A new sense of grim realism seemed to have taken hold.

"We are obviously in the midst of a challenging time," Kerry said. "And here in Sochi today, I was privileged to spend many hours with Foreign Minister Lavrov and with President Putin discussing a number of global issues on which both of our countries are very focused. I'm grateful to President Putin for the significant amount of time that he made available to this discussion, for his directness, and for his very detailed explanations of Russia's position with respect to some of these challenges, and of the ways that he believed that we have an ability to be able to work constructively together in order to resolve these problems."

The leaders discussed ways to cooperate regarding the Syrian conflict and the Iranian nuclear agreement and stressed the need for a peaceful settlement to the Ukraine crisis along the lines of the Minsk-2 agreement that called for Kiev to negotiate with the ethnic Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine toward a goal of free elections and greater autonomy for the east.

When Kerry was asked about recent statements from Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko about the need to resume fighting around the rebel-held city of Donetsk, Kerry responded: "I have not had a chance I have not read the speech. I haven't seen any context. I have simply heard about it in the course of today.

But if indeed President Poroshenko is advocating an engagement in a forceful effort at this time, we would strongly urge him to think twice not to engage in that kind of activity, that that would put Minsk in serious jeopardy. And we would be very, very concerned about what the consequences of that kind of action at this time may be.”

After Kerry left, however, the talks with Russian officials were turned over to Assistant Secretary Nuland, who is recognized at senior levels of the Obama administration as “an ideologue” who tends to place her neoconservative beliefs ahead of pragmatic diplomatic needs. For instance, earlier this year, she oversaw a maneuver by the Kiev authorities to insert a “poison pill” into the Minsk-2 implementation by insisting that the rebels first surrender.

In her public comments, however, Nuland sounded somewhat chastened by the shift in the Obama administration’s direction. After follow-up meetings in Moscow on May 18, Nuland described the talks as “very pragmatic” and focused on “how we build on the conversation in Sochi, on all of the issues that were discussed between President Putin and Secretary Kerry. The United States’ goal here is to support the full implementation of Minsk. We are doing this in lockstep with our colleagues in the EU, with Germany and France.”

Glorifying Ukrainian Fascists

The extremism of the Kiev regime also has finally begun to wear away the shine that has bedazzled the U.S. mainstream news media since the days of the Maidan uprising in late 2013 and early 2014. After a year or more of denouncing anyone who dared notice the neo-Nazi taint, the U.S. media has been confronted with so much evidence of the problem that it is hard to continue ignoring.

For instance, the Jerusalem Post reported on new legislation, just signed by Ukraine’s President Poroshenko, to glorify some of Ukraine’s Nazi collaborators from World War II. The article by Josh Cohen, a former U.S. Agency for International Development official, noted that the law honors “organizations involved in mass ethnic cleansing during World War Two.

“Two of the groups honored – the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) – helped the Nazis carry out the Holocaust while also killing close to 100,000 Polish civilians during World War Two.

“Many OUN leaders were trained in Nazi Germany, and the group’s philosophy was influenced by Nazi racial theorists such as Alfred Rosenberg. OUN literature, for example, declared the need to ‘combat Jews as supporters of the Muscovite-Bolshevik regime Death to the Muscovite-Jewish commune! Beat the commune, save

Ukraine!’

“The OUN fought both the Nazis and the Soviets, and many Ukrainian nationalists have argued that the OUN was primarily a national liberation movement. But while the OUN’s core goal may have been the creation of an independent Ukrainian state, along the way its members were responsible for terrible atrocities.

“Starting with a pogrom in Lviv shortly after the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, OUN militias – with the support of the Nazis – embarked on a killing spree in Western Ukraine that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Jews. After the Nazis dissolved these militias, many of their members joined the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police in German service, where they received weapons-training and became one of the most important instruments of the Holocaust in Belarus and Western Ukraine.”

Cohen continued: “More recently, radical nationalists played a key role as ‘shock troops’ on the Maidan, and the anti-government camp was full of OUN-UPA flags and cries of ‘Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!’ – chants that originated with the OUN. Currently, a number of OUN-UPA apologists occupy important government positions, including the minister of education, the head of the Security Service of Ukraine and the director of the Ukrainian government’s Institute of National Memory. Even Poroshenko has gotten into the act, laying a wreath in honor of the OUN at Babi Yar last year.”

Another element of the new law honoring these Nazi collaborators was a provision outlawing any criticism of these now protected groups. That raised alarms from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has supported the Kiev regime in its face-off with Moscow.

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović noted that the law, signed by Poroshenko on May 15, criminalizes expressions of disrespect for these groups and criminalizes public denial of the legitimacy of their fight for Ukrainian independence.

“The media is a vital element of a healthy democracy and its role should be respected at all times,” Mijatović said. “Contested information and potentially problematic speech should not be banned, on the contrary, it should be addressed through an open debate. Disproportionate restrictions on media freedom can never be justified in a democratic state and Ukraine’s significant progress in this area should be preserved, not undermined.”

So, as the Kiev regime remains burdened with internal corruption and a collapsing economy and continues veering toward the extreme right Nuland’s “regime change” adventure of 2014 looks harder and harder to defend, even within

the mainstream U.S. media. Besides getting thousands of people killed and creating even worse suffering for Ukraine, there is less and less for Nuland and the neocons to point to as justification for all the blood and heartache.

Now, with Obama finally recognizing that he needs Putin's help if a catastrophe of the first order is to be averted in Syria and Iraq, the cause of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism no longer can remain a top priority of the U.S. government.

Still, by leaving so many ideologues both neocons and liberal interventionists inside his administration, Obama is taking the risk that his belated bid to avert a Mideast disaster could still be sabotaged by underlings who don't share his goals.

In comments to reporters on May 18, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov made reference to these problems, noting that "our partners" usually a reference to American officials "show commitment to the Minsk Agreements only in speeches, while, in fact, they are trying to twist things. Given what I said about trying to interpret the Minsk Agreements in a perverse manner, the process will not be easy."

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). 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](#).
