

Obama Boots Syrian Peace Chance

Exclusive: President Obama thinks he can appease the neocons and liberal hawks by talking tough about Syria and Russia but in doing so he is throwing away a promising opportunity to resolve the Syrian conflict, plus he still gets bashed by Official Washington's pundits, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama is turning his back on possibly the last best chance to resolve the bloody Syrian war because he fears a backlash from Official Washington's powerful coalition of neoconservatives and "liberal interventionists" along with their foreign fellow-travelers: Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf sheikdoms.

The route toward peace would be to collaborate with Russia and Iran to get Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to accept a power-sharing unity government that would fairly represent Syria's major religious and ethnic groups Christians, Alawites, Shiites and moderate Sunnis along with a commitment for free, internationally monitored elections once adequate security is restored.

But for such an arrangement to work, Obama also would have to crack down aggressively on U.S. regional "allies" to ensure that they stopped funding, supplying and otherwise assisting the Sunni extremist forces including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State (or ISIS). Obama would have to confront the Sunni "allies" including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey as well as Israel.

His pressure would have to include stern action aimed at the global finances of the Gulf states i.e., seizing their assets as punishment for their continuing support for terrorism as well as similar sanctions against Turkey, possibly ousting it from NATO if it balked, and a withdrawal of political and financial support for Israel if it continued helping Nusra fighters and viewing Al Qaeda as the "lesser evil" in Syria. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia and Israel.](#)"]

Obama also would have to make it clear to Syria's "moderate" Sunni politicians whom the U.S. government has been subsidizing for the past several years that they must sit down with Assad's representatives and work out a unity government or the American largesse would end.

This combination of strong international pressure on the Sunni terror infrastructure and strong-arming internal players in Syria into a unity government could isolate the Sunni extremists from Al Qaeda and the Islamic

State and thus minimize the need for military strikes whether carried out by Russia (against both Al Qaeda and ISIS) or the U.S. coalition (focusing on ISIS).

And, the arrival of Russian military support for the Assad government as well as the increased backing from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah represented the moment when the prospect for peace was brightest, whatever one thinks of those various players. However, instead of working with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, President Obama chose to bend to the pressures of Official Washington.

Appeasing the Warmongers

Thinking he had stretched the tolerance of neocons and liberal hawks as far as he could by pushing through the nuclear deal with Iran, Obama fell in line behind their propagandistic denunciations of Assad and Putin. Obama's administration joined in promoting the new favorite "group think" of Washington that Putin had promised to only bomb the Islamic State and then reneged by attacking "moderate" rebels and their more powerful ally, Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

Conveniently, this storyline doesn't cite the wording of Putin's supposed "promise" although some articles do mention him vowing to attack "terrorist" groups, which the mainstream U.S. news media has interpreted as the Islamic State only. But this odd framing accepts the breathtaking premise that Al Qaeda is no longer a terrorist organization apparently rehabilitated by the fact that Israel has been helping Al Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front, along the Golan Heights and prefers it to Assad's continued rule. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Should US Ally with Al Qaeda in Syria?](#)"]

Among the many purveyors of this "Putin lied" narrative is Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, who on Tuesday repeated the canard that Putin had "promised" to strike only the Islamic State and then broke that promise. For good measure, Cohen added that the Russians had "invaded" Syria although they were formally invited by the recognized government of Syria.

"Yes, the Russians did invade," Cohen wrote. "They sent war planes, mechanized units and even troops into Syria. They have begun bombing missions, apparently hitting insurgents seeking to topple Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and not only, as Russian President Vladimir Putin promised, Islamic State units. Putin surprise! lied."

Normally in journalism, before we accuse someone of lying, we show what they actually said and contrast it with the facts. But Official Washington has long

since moved Putin into the free-fire zone of demonization. Anything can be said about him, whether based in reality or not, and anyone who objects to this “group think” is called a “Putin bootlicker” or a “Putin apologist.”

Thus, any reality-based skepticism is ruled out of the frame of debate. Such was the way that the United States plunged blindly into the Iraq War in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was the demonized figure and the Europeans who warned President George W. Bush not to invade were laughed at as “Euro-weenies.” American skeptics were “Saddam apologists.”

Inside-Out ‘Logic’

Cohen is back at it again in his Tuesday column, which on the Internet has the curious title “The High Cost of Avoiding War in Syria.” Cohen throws around the word “invasion” where Russia is involved even when there was no “invasion” but he advocates an actual U.S. invasion with cavalier hypocrisy.

Cohen slams Obama for not having established “a no-fly zone” in Syria earlier, which would have involved the United States bombing and destroying Syria’s air force, a clear act of aggression and an obvious boon to Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Cohen also says he was for “arming the rebels,” another violation of international law which when tried by Obama to appease the drumbeat from Cohen and his ilk led to many U.S.-trained and U.S.-armed rebels taking their equipment and skills to Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Yet, Cohen – on the prized opinion real estate of The Washington Post’s op-ed page and in his nationally syndicated column – unapologetically encourages an illegal invasion of another country while condemning Russia for doing the same except that Russia was following international law by working with the sovereign government of Syria and therefore has not “invaded” Syria.

We also are supposed to forget that Cohen’s ideas would benefit Sunni jihadists, such as the Al Qaeda-dominated “Army of Conquest” which could use the “no-fly zones” to mount a victorious offensive to capture Damascus and create a humanitarian crisis even worse than now.

Possibly with ISIS chopping off the heads of “infidels” Christians, Alawites, Shiites, etc. and with Al Qaeda having a new home in the center of the Middle East to plot terror strikes on the West, Cohen’s plan might necessitate a major U.S. military intervention that would get even more people killed and deal the final death blow to the American Republic.

In evaluating Cohen’s lame-brained double-think, it is worth remembering that he was one of the many U.S. opinion leaders who cheered on Secretary of State Colin

Powell's deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003. Waving "we-love-Colin" pompoms alongside all his esteemed colleagues, Cohen laughed at anyone who still doubted that Saddam Hussein possessed hidden WMD stockpiles.

"The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman could conclude otherwise."

Ha-ha, did you get that clever line "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman" pretty funny except that by heaping ridicule on those of us who doubted Powell's evidence, Cohen contributed to the deaths of some 4,500 U.S. soldiers, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, the cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than \$1 trillion, and chaos now spreading across not just the Middle East but into Europe.

In a normal place where there was some modicum of accountability, you would have expected Cohen to be banished to Storage Room B with his red stapler or worse. But no, Cohen is back running with the same juvenile in-crowd, behaving just as stupidly and just as recklessly as he has many times in the past.

Obama Intimidated

But the larger problem is that President Obama appears intimidated by this collection of know-it-alls who preen across the editorial pages of The Washington Post and The New York Times or who hold down prestigious "fellowships" at the Brookings Institution or other big-name think tanks or who self-identify as "human rights activists" advocating "humanitarian" wars.

Arguably, Obama has always had an outsized regard for people with establishment credentials. It is, after all, how he rose through the ranks as first an extremely bright academic and later a talented orator and politician. Without family connections or personal wealth, he needed the approval of various influential individuals. If he offended them in some way, he risked being pigeonholed as "an angry black man."

Indeed, the comedy duo Key & Peele developed a series of funny skits with Jordan Peele playing the always proper and controlled Obama and Keegan-Michael Key as "anger translator Luther." Obama even invited "Luther" to translate Obama's speech to the 2015 White House Correspondents Dinner, except that by the end of that talk Obama was expressing his own anger and Luther peeled away.

The problem in the real world is that Obama remains cowed by the Important People of Washington represented in that oh-so-important crowd at the dinner and

bows to their misguided thinking.

Obama also is facing a beefed-up lobbying operation for Saudi Arabia to go along with the always formidable Israel Lobby. The Intercept reported that in September the Saudi kingdom added to its large stable of thoroughbred influence-peddlers by signing "Edelman, the largest privately owned public relations agency in the world [and] the Podesta Group a lobbying firm founded by Tony Podesta, a major fundraiser for the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign."

Indeed, the repressive Saudi kingdom may need some special P.R. help as it prepares to behead Ali Mohammed al-Nimr whose body would then be attached to a cross or otherwise displayed in a crucifixion that would leave his corpse to rot for several days as a warning to others. Al-Nimr is a Shiite who at the age of 17 in 2012 participated in a pro-democracy demonstration that was viewed as an affront to the monarchy.

The Saudis also have been waging a ruthless air war against impoverished Yemen, attacking Houthis who stem from a branch of Shia Islam which Saudi Sunni Wahhabism considers apostasy. The Saudi bombing campaign, which recently killed some 131 celebrants at a wedding inside Yemen, gets intelligence and logistical support from the Obama administration even though the slaughter of Houthis has benefited their Yemeni rivals, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" who have gained ground behind the Saudi air offensive.

Diverting Attention

Yet, the Saudis' P.R. battalions along with the Israel Lobby have kept Official Washington's focus in other directions. Indeed, there are now so many false or dubious narratives dis-informing the capital's "group think" that U.S. decisions are driven more by mythology than facts.

Obama could begin the process of restoring sanity to Washington by declassifying U.S. intelligence analyses on several key issues. For instance, Obama could release what's now known about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

After that attack, there was a rush to judgment at the State Department and within the mainstream U.S. news media to blame that atrocity on Assad's forces, although I'm told that CIA analysts have since moved away from that view and now agree that the attack was likely a provocation designed to draw the U.S. military into the war on the side of the Sunni jihadists. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case."]

Though Obama and other officials have dropped the sarin accusations from their public speeches harping instead on "barrel bombs" as if those homemade weapons

are some uniquely evil device Obama has refused to retract the sarin allegations which helped shape the hyper-hostile “conventional wisdom” against Assad.

Similarly, Obama has withheld U.S. intelligence information about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine, letting stand hasty accusations blaming Putin. Obama appears infatuated by the trendy concept of “strategic communications” or “Stratcom,” which blends psy-ops, propaganda and P.R. into one noxious brew to poison public opinion about one’s “enemy.”

With the recent Russian military intervention in Syria, Obama had the chance to correct the record on the sarin-gas attack and the MH-17 shoot-down but instead continued the “Stratcom” both in his United Nations speech and his news conference last Friday with more hyperbolic attacks against Assad and Putin. In doing so, Obama apparently bowed to the desired rhetoric of hardliners like U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power and the editorial-page masters of The Washington Post and The New York Times.

Obama may have hoped his harsh language would appease the neocons and their liberal-hawk pals, but the tough-guy rhetoric has only opened him up to new attacks over the disparity between his words and deeds. As the clueless columnist Richard Cohen wrote, “A no-fly zone needs to be established. It is not too late to do *something*. By doing so little, the United States has allowed others to do so much.” [Emphasis in original.]

In other words, Cohen appears to want the U.S. military to shoot down Russian planes over Syria, even though the Russians have been invited by the recognized government to be there and the U.S. has not. The minor complication of possible human extinction from a nuclear war apparently is of little consequence when compared to the street cred that one gets from such manly talk.

For Official Washington and apparently Obama the peace option is regarded as unacceptable, i.e., working with Russia and Iran to achieve a power-sharing unity government in Damascus (with the promise of elections as soon as possible) along with the United States demanding from its regional “allies” a complete shutdown of assistance to the Islamic State, Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and all other Sunni jihadists.

That option would require Obama and the neocon/liberal-hawk cowboys to get down off their high horses, admit they have been tossing their lasso in the wrong direction and compromise.

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](#).
