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Obama's Many Middle East Miseries Multiply

By Jim Lobe

July 13, 2013

No doubt the administration of President Barack Obama had hoped that this week's foreign policy news would be dominated by the high-level U.S.-China Strategic and Economic and Dialogue (S&ED) that just ended here Thursday.

That would have furthered the administration's effort to "pivot" public attention, as well as serious policy-making, more towards the Asia/Pacific region which it sees as critical to Washington's long-term geostrategic and economic future.

But, alas, as so many other times in the four-and-a-half years of Obama's presidency, the administration found itself dealing instead with latest of a seemingly never-ending series of crises that have wreaked havoc with its larger strategic ambitions.

Of course, events in Egypt grabbed most of the headlines this week as the administration tried to cope with the aftermath of last week's coup d'etat against the democratically elected government of President Mohamed Morsi.

In particular, its efforts both to avoid calling the putsch a "coup" – a word that would have automatically triggered a cut-off in some 1.3 billion dollars in military aid under U.S. law – and to dissuade the same military and its backers from cracking down hard against Morsi's Muslim

Brotherhood and quickly restore some semblance of an inclusive civilian-led democratic transition appeared both clumsy and, thus far at least, largely ineffectual.

Meanwhile, the civil war in Syria – which emerged as the dominant foreign policy issue of this year’s spring season only to be displaced by the coup in Egypt at the end of last month– edged its way back onto the news this week in ways that were hardly helpful to the administration.

First, the administration’s plans to provide arms to the rebels, announced by the White House last month amidst growing pressure from lawmakers and after the intelligence community had confirmed the use on several occasions by Syrian government forces of small amounts of sarin gas against insurgents, have apparently stalled indefinitely.

Congress’ two intelligence committees objected to the plans advanced by the administration for the same reasons, ironically, that the administration itself had long resisted appeals to provide lethal aid to the rebels: both because U.S. officials could not guarantee that the arms would not fall into the “wrong” hands – that is, fighters associated with radical Islamist groups – and because of the fear that providing such assistance would be the first step down a “slippery slope” toward U.S. intervention in yet another Middle Eastern civil war.

“Primary for me is the concern that if we become an arms supplier...we’ll be sucked into another sectarian civil war,” Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, told the ‘Washington Post,’ echoing many of the same off-the-record arguments administration officials had been making for most of the past year.

“Providing a small amount won’t be enough to change the trajectory on the battlefield, and we’ll be called upon to give more, and more sophisticated weapons. ...I think the risk is too great that once we get in, it will be very difficult to get out,” he said.

Adding to the bad news from Damascus this week were reports that growing and increasingly violent divisions between the radical Islamist groups – whose ranks keep growing as foreign fighters are reportedly pouring in at levels approaching those of Afghanistan under the Soviet occupation – and the Western-backed factions, notably the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Thursday’s assassination of a top FSA commander by an Al-Qaeda linked militia near Latakia, a region where government forces have increasingly taken the offensive, could signal a civil war within rebel ranks themselves, increasing the risks that weapons provided to the FSA could actually wind up in the hands of much more radical groups.

“The fact is, there is just no appetite whatsoever up here (in Congress) to get involved in another Middle East conflict,” one lobbyist who supports aid to the rebels told IPS last week.

Meanwhile, Monday’s resignation of Ghassan Hitto, the Syrian-American chosen by the Western-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to create an interim government, added to the sense of disarray and incoherence that has long afflicted rebel ranks.

Analysts here said his departure reflected the diminished influence of Qatar, which, along with Turkey, has backed figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, including Egypt's Morsi.

Indeed, both Hitto's resignation and the coup in Egypt signalled to most analysts here the determination of the other Gulf kingdoms, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – both of which have long been hostile to the Brotherhood – to play a more assertive role.

In the wake of the coup, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, along with Kuwait, announced this week that they will provide the new Egyptian regime with 12 billion dollars in grants and loans to help it cope with its collapsing economy – four billion dollars more than what Qatar had provided to the Morsi government and nearly 10 times more than Washington's total annual aid package for Cairo.

All of these developments have put Washington in an extremely delicate – if relatively powerless — position.

On Syria, the plan to provide arms – and, in so doing, to assert its “leadership” among the external supporters of the insurgency against President Bashar al-Assad – appears now to have been put on hold, thus undermining Washington's already-low credibility among the rebels' other backers, as well as the FSA fighters in the field who may soon find themselves besieged on two fronts.

Assad's departure or defeat – first demanded publicly by Obama more than two years ago – looks further away than ever.

In Egypt, the U.S. finds itself in a particularly invidious position. Before the coup, Washington was perceived by the millions of protesters who demanded Morsi's ouster as backing the president and the Brotherhood.

Any move by the administration to indicate support for the coup now – including the continuation of military aid or suggestions by its officials that Morsi deserved to be overthrown – will be (and has already been) interpreted by Islamists, who undoubtedly remain a sizable force in the body politic, as a betrayal of Washington's promises to support democracy in the region.

Although the administration has made clear that it hopes to use aid as a lever by which to coax them military into accepting a “democratic transition” that will include the Brotherhood and other Islamists, the scale of the promised assistance from the Gulf monarchies diminishes that leverage considerably.

Indeed, U.S. appeals not to crack down on the Brotherhood leadership, conveyed primarily from top Pentagon officials to their Egyptian counterparts, have so far proved almost entirely ineffective.

As pointed out by one Middle East expert, Marc Lynch, on his foreignpolicy.com blog Friday, the Gulf kingdoms have their own agenda – “to finally put the nail in the coffin of the detested Arab uprisings by re-establishing the old order in the most important of the transitional states.”

“Washington is now more trapped than ever between its professed hopes for democratic change in the region and its alliance with the anti-democratic regimes of the Gulf,” according to Lynch.

The State Department Friday called on Morsi to be released from military detention and charged that MB leaders have been subjected to “politically motivated arrests”. This, then, will be a test of U.S. influence.