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Obama's Speech on Syria: Lies to Justify an Immoral War

By Larry Everest

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On Saturday, August 31, President Barack Obama—in the words of the New York Times—"stunned the world" by giving a speech in which he promised to give the U.S. Congress time to weigh in before any attack on Syria would be launched. Congress returns to session on Monday, September 9.

 U.S. moves to attack Syria are not driven by whether the reactionary regime in Syria used nerve gas against its own people. As Revolution wrote, "The rulers of the U.S. view atrocities and war crimes—real, or invented—through warped and twisted lens of 'how does this work for us.'" And Obama's speech and plan is not a move to accede to the "will of the people." The nature of a U.S. attack on Syria is defined by the needs of the U.S. empire. (For an important analysis of what is driving the U.S. to attack Syria, see "Only Worse Suffering and Horrors Can Result from a U.S. Attack on Syria.")

Obama's speech was a move to impose a very warped, distorted, and false framework on discussion and debate over a U.S. attack on Syria. It situated a U.S. attack within a big lie about the benevolent role the U.S. has played and is playing in the world today. A U.S. attack on Syria would be another war crime in the long annals of U.S. war crimes. And, such an attack has the potential to spin out of control in unpredictable ways. Obama's speech was aimed at manufacturing public opinion within the U.S. for the war, but also at hammering out unity within the U.S. ruling class for an assault on Syria. And it was aimed at forging some kind of coalition

of other oppressive world powers. All in preparation for an attack on Syria that would greatly increase the suffering of people there and that could set off an unpredictable chain of events that could explode into a major conflict.

An Im-Moral Framework

Obama's speech proclaimed a version of modern world history that turned reality upside down. He said, "But we are the United States of America, and we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to what happened in Damascus. Out of the ashes of world war, we built an international order and enforced the rules that gave it meaning. And we did so because we believe that the rights of individuals to live in peace and dignity depends on the responsibilities of nations. We aren't perfect, but this nation more than any other has been willing to meet those responsibilities."

This is a shameless, lie-filled rewriting of the history of U.S. crimes around the world, including in the Middle East over the past 60-plus years—why they've taken these actions, what their nature and agenda really is, and about who are by far the greatest war criminals and mass murderers—including of children!—on the face of the earth, bar none.

Take one part of one dimension of the horrors inflicted by the U.S. on the world, the toll from some of the wars it instigated, fueled, or directly waged on Iraq and Iran alone—all for reasons of empire:

* 1972-1975, thousands of Iraqi Kurds were slaughtered and over 200,000 made refugees as a result of the U.S. encouraging them to rise against the Saddam Hussein regime, and then stabbing them in the back;

* 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war: the U.S. helped instigate and fuel this war by arming and aiding both sides: conservative estimates place the death toll at 367,000—262,000 Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis. An estimated 700,000 were injured or wounded on both sides, bringing the total casualty figure to over one million.

* 1991 Persian Gulf War—the U.S. and its allies invaded Iraq: in 43 days over 100,000 Iraqi soldiers were slaughtered and an estimated 300,000 wounded.

* 2003-2011 the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, a war based on lies about weapons of mass destruction: a minimum of 150,000 Iraqis killed, but most likely between 600,000 and 1 million dead; 4.5 million driven from their homes (along with ongoing reactionary, sectarian slaughter).

And this is just in the Middle East! Look up the history of any country in Asia, Africa, or Latin America—or for that matter, the mass murder of civilians the U.S. perpetrated in Germany and Japan in World War 2. You'll find more made-in-U.S. massacres of civilians, pro-U.S. torture regimes, brutal exploitation, oppression, and environmental devastation.

Who Has Targeted Innocent Civilians Over and Over?

Obama said, "What's the purpose of the international system that we've built if a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons that has been agreed to by the governments of 98 percent of the world's people and approved overwhelmingly by the Congress of the United States is not enforced?"

The purpose of that international system is to enforce life-crushing, environment-destroying

imperialist exploitation around the globe, backed by and perpetuated by extreme violence—including the use of chemical or nuclear weapons where that is deemed necessary. This is why NOTHING is said about the fact that the U.S.'s number one ally and client Israel never signed the prohibition on chemical weapons and also possesses them.

This is why the U.S. use of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and constant threats to use nuclear weapons by both Israel and the U.S., including most recently against Iran—is treated as a perfectly normal part of U.S. "diplomacy." This is why the U.S. has backed one tyrant after another across the Mideast region, tyrants who with U.S. backing have viciously suppressed their own populations (as the Egyptian military is now doing before our eyes) in order to maintain U.S. regional dominance.

Obama asked, "What message will we send if a dictator can gas hundreds of children to death in plain sight and pay no price?"

The U.S. used napalm in Vietnam—a chemical weapon that stuck to humans, including children, and set them on fire.

U.S. allies supplied Saddam Hussein's regime with the chemicals and technology needed to make chemical weapons, which were then used on the battlefield against Iran—directed in part by U.S.-supplied intelligence—in order to prevent an Iranian victory in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. The U.S. also turned a blind eye to Hussein's gassing of the Kurds, particularly at Hallabja in 1988—in which indisputable proof exists that at least 5,000 Kurds were massacred—because Hussein was still considered a potential U.S. ally and nothing should be done to disrupt that relationship.

And as for caring about children: between 1990 and 1996, the U.S. was responsible for the deaths of over 500,000 Iraqi children by denying them clean water and medicines—as well as adequate food—through sanctions. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations at the time said, "we think the price [of U.S. sanctions against Iraq that resulted in the deaths of 500,000 children] is worth it." Talk about an "unspeakable outrage" that makes Syrian president Assad's very real crimes pale in comparison.

International Rules Are What the U.S. Says They Are… And Don't Apply to the U.S.

Obama said, "If we won't enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules?"

Yet in the very same speech, Obama is giving himself the right to "flout fundamental international rules"—namely the laws of war under which a military attack is only legal if it's a question of immediate self-defense or if action is authorized by the UN Security Council. Obama tells us he has the right to ignore—i.e., "flout" those rules: "I'm confident in the case our government has made without waiting for UN inspectors. I'm comfortable going forward without the approval of a United Nations Security Council that, so far, has been completely paralyzed and unwilling to hold Assad accountable."

So what message is sent if a global imperialist superpower gives itself the right to attack anyone it chooses, any time, even if such an attack is in violation of its own stated laws and principles?

The international treaties, organizations, and what is referred to as the "international community" that exist in the world today serve U.S. imperialism and as a forum to mediate

conflicts between U.S. imperialism and other global powers. The rulers of the U.S. invoke them to serve their needs. But when even those rules get in their way, then the rulers of the U.S. dismiss them without blinking an eye.

The Values That Define U.S. Imperialism

Obama said, "We cannot raise our children in a world where we will not follow through on the things we say, the accords we sign, the values that define us."

This, from the commander-in-chief of an empire that sits atop a world where the lives of children worldwide are in peril from hunger, poverty, disease, and war. Any attack on Syria by the U.S. is about maintaining that horrible world, and maintaining the U.S.'s power to continue to dominate and preserve such an endless nightmare.

Those ARE the values that define the U.S., and that IS what the U.S. is inflicting on the 1.9 billion children around the world, even threatening the future of life on earth with its wanton destruction of the environment.

Time for Protest… And a Whole Other Way

Obama claimed he had already decided to attack Syria, and that he had the authority to do so, "But having made my decision as commander-in-chief based on what I am convinced is our national security interests, I'm also mindful that I'm the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. I've long believed that our power is rooted not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And that's why I've made a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress."

But Obama's very double-talk, his own words expose the lie of "by the people, for the people." He says straight out it would be better for his plans if he went through the charade of democracy to enlist the people: "Yet, while I believe I have the authority to carry out this military action without specific congressional authorization, I know that the country will be stronger if we take this course, and our actions will be even more effective." In other words, this delay is about strengthening the U.S. military's hand against Syria and other global rivals.

What is going on here IS an exercise in democracy—but it is an exercise in capitalist-imperialist democracy, which is in essence the dictatorship of the imperialist ruling class. The Obama team felt it had the freedom, but also the NECESSITY, given the widespread public cynicism about yet another case of "slam dunk" evidence, yet another U.S. military adventure, and unresolved concerns in the ruling class over where an attack on Syria would lead, to give this speech and launch this process he calls for, along with a need to make a case to an international audience and push allies into line and deal with a complex international alignment of forces.

But this is not the government soliciting the people's views and listening to them. It's the imperialist rulers setting the terms and framework of discussion, insisting people confine their thinking to THAT—in order to build public support and acquiescence in the crimes they have already decided to carry out.

NONE OF THAT IS ANY GOOD. This is NOT about allowing public input into the strategic moves of U.S. imperialism—it is about ENLISTING the public in terms set by the ruling class. It is about SELLING not just this attack, but a whole upside-down, warped framework.

The LAST thing people should do right now is breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, this is a moment to SEIZE to organize protests and teach-ins, to WIDELY circulate Revolution's coverage and perspective, including on campuses, and to bring forward a visible force within the U.S. that rejects the whole framework and agenda in Obama's speech.