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Obama, Congress and the coming war against Syria

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4 September 2013

President Barack Obama's change of course in seeking US congressional authorization for military aggression against Syria, far from representing a more measured or democratic approach, is aimed at providing political cover for an unpopular war of unlimited scope. What is being planned goes far beyond anything that the US and world public have been led to expect.

The administration on Tuesday kicked off a relentless propaganda campaign, described by aides as "flooding the zone." With the full collaboration of the media, the aim is to obliterate any critical thinking in relation to the lies and pretexts that have been put forward to justify another unprovoked war against an oppressed former colonial country. At the same time, the war propaganda is designed to delegitimize and intimidate opposition and make military action seem inevitable.

Congress is being enlisted in this effort in the form of an Authorization of the Use of Military Force (AUMF) resolution, which is to be rammed through with the support of the leaderships of both big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

The pretense that the coming war is a "limited" humanitarian venture aimed at punishing Syria's Assad regime for the alleged use of chemical weapons is being thoroughly debunked in the process.

While administration spokesmen, led by Secretary of State John Kerry—formerly the richest person in the US Senate—have vilified the Assad regime as the equivalent of Hitler’s Third Reich, Washington has yet to produce a shred of verifiable evidence that the Syrian military was responsible for a chemical weapons attack on August 21 outside Damascus, the *casus belli* for the coming US aggression.

Instead, it has merely amplified propaganda from the US-backed opposition—a group of cutthroat militias spearheaded by Al Qaeda. Thus, in laying out the case for a US attack, Kerry made the claim that 1,429 people were killed in the August 21 attack, while Washington’s principal ally, Britain, put the number at 350. Even the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a group supporting regime-change in Syria, put the figure at roughly 500 and dismissed the US estimate as “propaganda.”

Such a gross exaggeration is symptomatic of a concocted pretext for war. While Washington’s claims have been discredited, there is mounting evidence that the August 21 deaths were caused by the opposition, which had the most to gain by staging such an attack—on the very day that UN weapons inspectors began their work in Damascus—and blaming it on the regime.

The coming military action is not about chemical weapons or saving Syrian lives. Rather, untold thousands of Syrian soldiers and civilians are to be massacred in US imperialism’s bid to redraw the map of the Middle East and demolish any impediments to its hegemony over the strategically vital and energy-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

The draft of the Authorization of the Use of Military Force submitted by the White House to Congress is crafted accordingly.

It should be recalled that 12 years ago, the Bush administration obtained an Authorization for the Use of Military Force from Congress that remains in effect to this day. In the name of an ill-defined “war on terror,” it has been used by both the Bush and Obama administrations as the justification for wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, the suspension of habeas corpus, the Guantanamo prison camp, torture, rendition, warrantless wiretaps and massive domestic spying as well as the indefinite military detention and even the assassination of US citizens on the sole say-so of the US president.

The passage of a new AUMF on the pretext of responding to the use of chemical weapons in Syria will have effects that are easily as far-reaching and potentially even more catastrophic.

Not accidentally, among the more penetrating analyses of the Obama administration’s proposed AUMF is one by Jack Goldsmith, the Harvard University law professor who resigned from his post in the Bush Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel over the so-called torture memos.

Writing on the web site Lawfare, Goldsmith warns, “There is *much* more here than at first meets the eye. The proposed AUMF focuses on Syrian WMD but is otherwise very broad. It authorizes the President to use any element of the US Armed Forces and any method of force. It does not contain specific limits on targets—either in terms of the identity of the targets (e.g., the Syrian government, Syrian rebels, Hezbollah, Iran) or the geography of the targets.”

The resolution authorizes the use of force “in connection with the use of chemical weapons,” to prevent the use or proliferation “within, to or from Syria” of not only such weapons, but any “components of or materials used in such weapons.” In addition, force can be used to “protect the United States and its allies and partners against the threat posed by such weapons.”

Such language would allow Obama to order an attack on either Iran or Russia on the grounds that their material support for the Syrian regime was “connected” to its ability to use chemical weapons. It allows US military action in response to supposed threats to Israel, Turkey or Jordan. In short, it clears the deck for a region-wide and even global war.

The timid proposals for amending the resolution by the House and Senate leaderships only underscore the scope of the planned military action. One proposed change would limit military action to 60 days, with a possible extension of another 30. In other words, up to three months of US bombardment of Syria, an already war-devastated country, are being contemplated, something that would immensely compound the already existing humanitarian catastrophe. Limits on “boots on the ground” would apparently include exemptions for insertion of US Special Forces troops as needed.

The Obama administration, like that of Bush before it, will use any authorization to do whatever the US military and intelligence complex deems necessary to achieve US imperialism’s aims, and will brush aside any restrictions written into a resolution as meaningless and non-binding.

From talking of firing a “shot across the bow” of the Assad regime and conducting a “limited and tailored” operation, Obama has begun assuring members of Congress, and particularly right-wing Republicans, that the coming US military operation will have serious “teeth” and will be aimed in large measure at both “degrading” the military capabilities of the Syrian government and “upgrading” the capacities of the so-called “rebels.”

This was the intention all along, with chemical weapons dragged in as a pretext for a military intervention aimed at reversing the defeats suffered by the Al Qaeda-led militias over the past several months.

Significantly, the first members of Congress whose support was sought by Obama were Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who have been the administration’s harshest critics for failing earlier to conduct a direct military intervention in support of the Western-backed anti-Assad forces.

The lining up of McCain and Obama exposes the fraud of American democracy. Little more than five years ago, Obama ran against McCain and was swept into office on a tide of hostility to the wars and crimes carried out under the Bush administration. Now, he turns to the likes of McCain for support, under conditions in which the overwhelming majority of the American people oppose a new war based on lies in the Middle East.

The Democratic administration of Obama, like its predecessor, is inveterately hostile to these sentiments and determined to pursue the predatory aims of America's corporate and financial establishment even if it costs the lives of millions.

The fight must begin to develop a broad popular movement against a new war. Such a movement can be organized only if it is independent of the two big business parties and Congress. Led by the working class, it must mobilize students and youth in opposition to war and militarism and the crisis-ridden capitalist system from which they arise.