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US, Syria, Iran: What Just Happened?

By Jack A. Smith

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In the last month, the U. S. government has reversed course on its intention to attack Syria, and conveyed the impression that it wants to mitigate Washington's long-term hostility toward Iran. Is a new era of peace and friendship emanating from the Obama Administration? Or is it, perhaps, a move to both spare President Obama a rejection of his war plans by Congress and to further U.S. global interests?

A few weeks ago, President Obama was determined to attack Syria over President Assad's alleged order to his army to use outlawed chemical weapons against civilians in a suburb of Damascus. Both Syria and its Russian ally deny the regime ordered the attack, and, despite the UN report, there is no direct evidence that it did so. There certainly hasn't been an explanation of why Assad – an individual who certainly clings to power – would undertake the one action that would provoke a US attack.

Obama was so eager to send his cruise missiles into Syria he said he was "comfortable" not having approval from the UN, even though it would be illegal under international treaties to which the US is a signatory. He said he had a right to commit an act of war against Syria without congressional approval. Secretary of State John Kerry, who actually seemed to be ranting at times, evidently provided the maximum evidence for attacking when he said President Assad "is like Hitler," so bombs away – but it didn't happen.

The unexpected occurred, removing the immediate threat of war when the Damascus regime agreed to give up its chemical weapons. (See part 2.) Opposition forces were furious. They were counting on a US bombardment to advance their struggle. Instead, inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) will oversee the destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal.

Until recent days, the Obama Administration was regularly increasing its draconian economic sanctions on Iran unless the Teheran government ended its attempt to build nuclear weapons.

Now, Obama is trying to cultivate a less hostile, working relationship with newly elected President Hassan Rouhani that may in time lead to a reduction in tensions that have continued without interruption since the hostage crisis of 1979. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is obviously supporting Rouhani's efforts.

In his first UN speech Rouhani said Iran was ready to enter talks regarding the nuclear question and emphasized Iran desired a reduction in tensions with the United States. He stated that Iran had a right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. He strongly repeated what Tehran has declared for years – that his country is not in the process of building a nuclear bomb.

The Oval Office sought to arrange a "chance" first meeting at the UN between the two presidents leading to a public handshake. Rouhani demurred; it was too early for that. Instead, Obama called the Iranian leader by arrangement Sept. 27 and conversed for 15 minutes about an improvement in relations and resolving the nuclear imbroglio.

Some Iranians reportedly do not approve of the new president's willingness to compromise with the US, not least because there hasn't been a hint the sanctions will be removed. On Sept. 30, Gen. Mohammed Ali Jafari, a commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, said that Rouhani took a "firm and appropriate" position at the UN General Assembly, but should have refused the telephone call. Two days later, Rouhani received substantial support from parliament, when 230 members signed a statement of support for his efforts to improve relations with the US and only 60 did not.

It is doubtful that the Obama Administration planned either of these big changes, especially the Syrian outcome. The White House may have intended an overture to the "moderate" Rouhani at some point but to do so while bombing or preparing to bomb Tehran's principal Arab ally was impractical. The abrupt decision not to bomb Syria made a talk possible.

It is extremely doubtful the steps taken by the US in the last few weeks have anything to do with a new era of peace and friendship. President Obama was intent on bombing Syria as a show of US power. As we discuss below, he completely misjudged the views of the American people regarding a new war and found himself on the precipice of a humiliating defeat. He grasped an unexpected way out.

Although he has long advocated and still desires regime change in Syria, Obama did not intend to topple the Assad regime. This wasn't for peaceful reasons. Over the last year he has come to recognize that his efforts to form a "moderate" front following US orders have failed so far, and

that the jihadist sector of the armed opposition has made huge advances in the last several months. If Assad fell now there's no telling who would end up in power controlling the regime's chemical weapons of mass destruction.

Toward Iran, the sanctions remain in place along with the threats. In a Sept. 30 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Obama declared: "We take no options off the table, including military options." This, of course, is a threat to use force, which the UN Charter prohibits, not that the Charter seems to matter any more.

Netanyahu's speech was that of man who has learned nothing and forgotten nothing throughout his political career: "Israel will not allow Iran to get nuclear weapons," he said. "If Israel is forced to stand alone, Israel will stand alone." Standing alone, lest we forget, with 200 nuclear weapons, a huge chemical war inventory and Washington inevitably coming to the rescue. The usually staid Inter-Press Service described Netanyahu's diatribe as being "like the proverbial skunk at the garden party." Incidentally, Israel belongs to neither the nuclear nor the chemical weapons treaties.

Obama has been seeking to bankrupt Iran over the question of nuclear weapons when he knows full well that a 2007 assessment by the Director of National Intelligence on behalf of all US spy agencies reported that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program years earlier – a finding reiterated in 2010 and applicable today. Actually Iran has several times sought reasonable solutions to the nuclear issue and improving relations but has been spurned. At the same time the Obama Administration has and continues to insist upon regime change in Damascus – without the jihadists – mainly because the Assad government is Iran's main Arab ally.

The United States exercises virtual hegemony over nearly the entire Middle East. It does not want oil-rich Iran to remain an independent major power in the region that won't bend its knee to Washington, especially if closer unity with neighboring Iraq is in its cards. America has sought regime change in Iran since its puppet, the vicious Shah of Iran, was overthrown in 1979. But it doesn't want a war because much of the Middle East would blow up. Now it is attempting to increase its influence by taking advantage of what it considers a more suitable government in Tehran.

Washington's long-range goals, of course, have not changed. Nor have Iran's.

Obama's only strategic contribution to US foreign/military policy – the "pivot," or "rebalancing" to Asia, announced with considerable fanfare a couple of years ago and reiterated last May – envisages toning down Washington's obsession with the "global war on terrorism" and reducing America's military commitment to the Middle East.

Containing China remains Washington's most important geostrategic objective. This includes strengthening the military encirclement of China, developing stronger ties with nations in the region which would rather ally with Washington than Beijing, and forming a free trade association of nations in the Asia/Pacific sector known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that the US, naturally, would dominate.

The White House, however, is more unbalanced than ever in the Middle East/North Africa theater. The administration's hegemonic foreign/military policy is attempting to simultaneously manipulate events in Syria, Iran, Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, the recent fighting in Mali and the terror bombing in Kenya, not to mention the unexpected growth of al-Qaeda affiliates in the region.

During his uncommonly long address to the UN Sept. 24 – which focused almost entirely on justifying all aspects of US foreign and military policy in the Middle East – Obama stressed: "We will be engaged in the region for the long haul" because "the hard work of forging freedom and democracy is the task of a generation."

"The United States," he continued, "is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure these core interests in the region." They included (1) "external aggression against our allies and partners;" to (2) "ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world;" to (3) "dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people;" and to (4) prevent "the development or use of weapons of mass destruction."

By "partners" (1) Obama means Israel and Arab countries that serve US interests. "Free flow of energy" (2) evidently means Washington can cut Tehran's flow by 50% through the use of sanctions, and by grossly limiting Iraq's capacity to sell oil between 1991-2003, then obliging Baghdad to denationalize Iraq's petroleum resources. By dismantling terrorist networks (3) – as in Afghanistan for the last 12 years, or in Syria against al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra fighting against the Assad government, or against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, which is fighting Shia and Shia-related regimes in Iraq and Syria. Preventing nuclear weapons (4) evidently means concealing that Israel is a major nuclear power and opposing the idea – put forward by Iraq – of making the Middle East a nuclear free zone.

Everything is still in flux, but it is possible to trace the incredible course of events that have transpired so far since mid-August, beginning with Syria, then going on to growth of jihadism and other matters.

Just as Obama was reaching to pull the trigger of war, two things occurred to stay his hand:

1. Obama was demanding to attack Syria because he had publicly established a so-called "red line" against the use of chemical warfare by Assad. The president and his more hawkish advisors evidently believed the US would appear weak if it did not retaliate with violence. As soon as attack plans were made public, the criticism began – at first mostly from the peace movement, which staged many protests across the country, but soon became a popular crescendo throughout the nation.

The White House tried to turn the tide by arranging for Obama to speak to Congress Sept. 10 when it returned from vacation but the opposition mounted. Eventually Kerry – Obama's passionate public advocate for war – toned down his inflammatory rhetoric to the point of promising "an unbelievably small" act of retaliation.

But the majority of the American people intervened with a loud "No! Another war in the Middle East was not acceptable, at least now. And for the first time in decades of America's wars of choice, Democrats and Republicans in Congress acted on behalf of the people and let Obama know he may well fail to obtain congressional approval.

Evidently with no way out, Obama decided to face Congress anyway in the vague hope that he could win enough votes from loyalist Democrats and Republican war hawks to engage in a quick war against Syria. It was an enormous political risk.

2. At precisely that moment there materialized a *deus ex machina* in unlikely personage to extricate the American leader from a serious dilemma of his own making. In the words of the *New York Times*: "President Obama awoke up Monday (Sept. 9) facing a Congressional defeat that many in both parties believed could hobble his presidency. And by the end of the day, he found himself in the odd position of relying on his Russian counterpart, Vladimir V. Putin, of all people, to bail him out."

A month earlier Obama aborted a planned summit with Putin "given our lack of progress" on many issues and "Russia's disappointing decision to grant Edward Snowden temporary asylum." Bloomberg news reported: "From the Russian perspective, it's a bit of a joke. One freshly minted Russian witticism, portrayed the US president as a jilted suitor: 'Obama won't see Putin because Putin is already seeing Snowden.'" Humor aside, Putin can now mark "paid" to this debt, whether or not Obama agrees.

The president grabbed Putin's offering of the Damascus government's willingness to transfer its entire chemical war arsenal to international control and ran with it. Obama's biggest worry wasn't that Assad may use such weapons (which the Syrian leader kept to ward off a possible Israeli attack) but that they may fall into the hands of the ever larger jihadist element of the resistance.

Putin devised a plan based on an offhand non-binding comment from Kerry that Assad could avoid war if he destroyed his chemical weapons. Then Putin ran with it – evidently first consulting with Obama at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg on September 5-6, and then dealing with the Syrians.

According to journalist Robert Fisk in a Sept. 22 article in the Independent (UK), Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem received an urgent summons to Moscow Sept. 7. He and his delegation met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov the morning of Sept. 9, evidently not knowing what was up the Kremlin's sleeve but hoping it was a reprieve from bombing. Assad appears nonchalant now, but he was worried about an attack until Obama himself began to minimize the size of the effort to gain public approval.

During the discussion, Muallem stated Syria's position: "If the real reason for the proposed aggression against Syria was the chemicals, then diplomatic means have not been exhausted." Then according to Fisk: "Lavrov broke off the conversation by telling Muallem that he was going at once to see President Putin at the Kremlin. 'I will get back to you,' he peremptorily told

the Syrians.... At 5 p.m. Lavrov called Muallem. They should meet in an hour. There was to be a press conference."

"Now Lavrov told Muallem of Putin's deal: all Syria's chemical weapons to be monitored, details handed over within days, all stocks to be under international control within a year. And the Russians would be most grateful if Muallem – at a press conference that evening – would be good enough to agree. Muallem called Damascus. He talked to Assad. He agreed. And so a long-faced, exhausted Muallem appeared in front of the world's television cameras – apparently almost overwhelmed with exhaustion – to "say yes....

"Afterwards," Fisk wrote, "Muallem told Lavrov that the agreement took from Syria its 'No 1' weapon. And Lavrov replied: 'Your best weapon is us.'"

Obama welcomed the last minute news and changed the text of his speech to Congress the next day from justifying a bombing campaign to explaining the agreement Putin had contrived. The last time Obama had spoken to Putin was at the G20 meeting, according to Asia Times correspondent M. K. Bhadrakumar, who suggested Obama's "understanding of the resolution probably needed a clarification by Lavrov on Russian state television the next day."

The upshot is that both Obama and Assad got reprieves, thanks to Putin's extraordinarily adept deadline diplomacy. He ran the entire show.

Commenting on Putin's role, George Friedman of Stratfor Global Intelligence wrote Sept.17: "The most important outcome globally is that the Russians sat with the Americans as equals for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, the Russians sat as mentors, positioning themselves as appearing to instruct the immature Americans in crisis management. To that end, Putin's op-ed in *the New York Times* was brilliant."

On Sept. 27, the Security Council voted to approve a resolution requiring Syria to eliminate its chemical weapons. All 15 members of the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to approve the measure, which will impose binding obligations on the Syrian government to destroy its chemical weapons, but at Russian insistence it does not threaten military action should anything go wrong. That would require a separate resolution.

China usually joins Russia in the UN Security Council on issues pertaining to Syria, as it does regarding Iran, much to Washington's chagrin. "China has been intensely critical of proposed US military action in Syria," writes David Cohn in China Brief Sept. 23. "Unlike Russia, China does not appear to believe that it has any direct interests in the issue, and seems more concerned with upholding the principle of unlimited sovereignty in internal affairs."

Meanwhile, of course, the slaughter goes on in Syria. So far over 100,000 people have been killed and millions displaced. The media and many opponents of the Syrian government often accuse Assad of killing 100,000 of his own civilians, but the situation is bad enough without such exaggerations. According to an article by Micah Zenko in Foreign Policy Sept. 17, based on figures from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the breakdown for deaths is:

Civilians, 40,146; Rebels 21,850; Pro-regime army and government militia, 45,469; Hezbollah members 171; unidentified, 2,726. Total 110,371.

The Obama Administration has been calling for the removal of President Assad's regime almost from the beginning of the conflict. Regime change in Syria was a serious consideration for the Bush Administration. It was one of several countries in the region on President Bush's hit list after an anticipated quick victory in Iraq.

The US has always objected to the fact that Syria has been close to Russia and the USSR since the 1950s though Damascus and Moscow have had sharp differences at times. The two countries cooperate in military, trade and economic matters. (Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean is in Syria's port city of Tartus.) Both countries have long been critics of US hegemony and Israel's maltreatment of the Palestinians. As if this weren't enough, the Syrian government enjoys warm relations with Iran – a coupling some Israeli leaders identify as an "Axis of Terror."

Obama may want Assad out, but more than that he doesn't want the jihadists in, which helps explain Washington's reluctance to seriously intervene until it can create a united Syrian front subordinate to US interests that can handle the political and military aspects of regime change in Damascus, including a successor to Assad.

The White House has spent the last two years molding the Syrian National Council (SNC) and "moderate" elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to lead the revolt. But the SNC, mainly composed of Syrian exiles, is frequently squabbling and has lost considerable support within the country. The FSA is said to be entirely composed of Sunni Muslims who are fighting against the largely Alawite government leadership in Damascus. The Alawites are an offshoot of the Shia branch of Islam. The jihadists are far less interested in democracy than in removing the "ungodly" Shi'ites from power.

In the face of reports that jihadist groups were increasing their strength within the oppositionist armed forces, Secretary of State Kerry asserted recently that moderate Syrian opposition groups are growing in influence. Responding to a comment made at a Senate Foreign Relations committee meeting Sept. 6 Kerry declared: "I just don't agree that a majority [of opposition forces] are al Qaeda and the bad guys. That's not true. There are about 70,000 to 100,000 oppositionists. Maybe 15% to 25% might be in one group or another who are what we would deem to be bad guys."

Nearly a thousand armed groups, most relatively small, are engaged in fighting against the Syrian government, but not all follow the designated FSA leadership. The fighters fall roughly into three groups – nationalist secularists (including many former Syrian soldiers who joined the opposition and who are backed by the U.S.), nationalist jihadists (primarily the Muslim Brotherhood) and international jihadists. "International" pertains to (largely Salafist) groups such as al-Qaeda that extend the fight for Sunni Islamic supremacy to all Muslim countries, not in just a single state.

Martin Chulov (Guardian UK May 30) reported: "The al-Qaeda-aligned groups that started mustering in Syria from July 2012 onwards have been consolidating in large swaths of the north and east and spreading out.... Black flags now fly above many mosques and civic buildings in towns across Syria's north.... and in Iraq's border towns."

Various reports now indicate that jihadist elements are large and swiftly growing. The conservative Economist declared Sept. 28: "The prospect of overthrowing Bashar Assad is catnip to jihadists; his Alawite regime is an heretical abomination to the hyper-orthodox Salafism from which al-Qaeda draws its support. Western intelligence thinks most of Syria's effective rebel militias may now be jihadist, with thousands of fighters from other Muslim countries and hundreds from Europe, especially Britain, France and the Netherlands.... The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), related to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), has recently pushed into eastern Syria from Iraq, following a resurgence there." (Regarding ISIS and the connection to Iraq, see article below, "Iraq's Undeclared War.")

On Sept. 25 Reuters reported: "A group of powerful rebel units have rejected the authority of the Western-backed Syrian opposition leadership abroad and called for it to be reorganized under an Islamic framework, according to a video statement posted on the Internet. At least 13 rebel factions were said to have endorsed the statement, including the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front) and the powerful Islamist battalions Ahrar Asham and the Tawheed Brigade." ISIS was not among them because of hostility and rivalry between that organization and the al-Nusra.

These groups represent tens of thousands of fighters. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty speculated that "if the coalition holds, it could mean Western powers would have no influence over what happens on the ground over a large part of the north as well as parts of Homs and Damascus."

The Wall Street Journal Reported Sept. 18: "In recent months, ISIS has become a magnet for foreign jihadists who view the war in Syria not primarily as a means to overthrow the Assad regime but rather as a historic battleground for a larger Sunni holy war. According to centuries-old Islamic prophecy they espouse, they must establish an Islamic state in Syria as a step to achieving a global one.... The proliferation of the Sunni jihadists and extremists has brought a new type of terror to the lives of many Syrians who have endured civil war in the north. Summary executions of Alawites and Shiites, who are seen as apostates, attacks on Shiite shrines, and kidnappings and assassinations of pro-Western rebels are on the rise."

The Daily Telegraph (UK) reported Sept. 12: "A new study by IHS Jane's, a defense consultancy, estimates there are around 10,000 jihadists [in Syria] – who would include foreign fighters – fighting for powerful factions linked to al-Qaeda. Another 30,000 to 35,000 are hardline Islamists who share much of the outlook of the jihadists, but are focused purely on the Syrian war rather than a wider international struggle. There are also at least a further 30,000 moderates belonging to groups that have an Islamic character, meaning only a small minority of the rebels are linked to secular or purely nationalist groups."

The Syrian rebels have considerable material support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and lesser from Turkey and the US. Much of NATO, Israel and many of Washington's allies back the rebels as well. Russia and China back Syria in the UN. Russia also supports the Assad government with weapons. Iran also offers support, as does Hezbollah, the Shia self-defense organization in Lebanon that has sent fighters to Syria.

Secularists in the FSA are obviously worried about the rise in jihadist strength. The Damascus regime is said to welcome negotiations to end the war, which appears to have become stalemated. The opposition has rejected negotiations before, demanding that Assad first step down.

Assad has let it be known that he intends to remain in office and that he has the right to decide whether to run for reelection next year.

Stratfor's Friedman argues: "The United States and Russia both want the Assad regime in place to block the Sunnis. They both want the civil war to end, the Americans to reduce the pressure on themselves to aid the Sunnis, the Russians to reduce the chances of the Assad regime collapsing."

Robert Fisk reported Sept. 30 that "Six weeks ago, a two-civilian delegation from Aleppo, representing elements of the Free Syrian Army... met (secretly), so I am told, a senior official on the staff of President Assad. And they carried with them an extraordinary initiative – that there might be talks between the government and FSA officers who 'believed in a Syrian solution' to the war.... There was no demand – at least at this stage – for Assad's departure." There was a commitment "that all must work for a democratic Syria." Fisk said Damascus agreed.

The Sunni jihadist/Islamist groups will have something to say about possible negotiations, which they have opposed in the past. No one knows how all this will turn out but it will come to a head sooner than later.