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Neocons Revive Syria ‘Regime Change’ Plan

By Robert Parry

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Exclusive: President Obama plans to violate international law by launching airstrikes inside Syria without that government’s consent, even though Syria might well give it. Is Obama playing into neocon hands by providing a new argument for “regime change” in Damascus, asks Robert Parry.

Official Washington’s ever-influential neoconservatives and their “liberal interventionist” allies see President Barack Obama’s decision to extend U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State terrorists into Syria as a new chance to achieve the long-treasured neocon goal of “regime change” in Damascus.

On the surface, Obama’s extraordinary plan to ignore Syrian sovereignty and attack across the border has been viewed as a unilateral U.S. action to strike at the terrorist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but it could easily evolve into a renewed effort to overthrow Bashar al-Assad’s government, ironically one of ISIS’s principal goals.



President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden meet with members of the National Security Council in the Situation Room of the White House, Sept. 10, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

ISIS began as part of the Sunni resistance to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq which had elevated Iraq's Shiite majority to power. Then known as "al-Qaeda in Iraq," the terrorist group stoked a sectarian war by slaughtering Shiites and bombing their mosques.

Changing its name to ISIS, the group shifted to Syria where it joined with U.S.-backed rebels seeking to overthrow Assad's regime which was dominated by Alawites, a branch of Shiite Islam. Then, this summer, ISIS returned to Iraq where it routed Iraqi government forces in a series of battles and conducted public executions, including beheading two U.S. journalists.

In his national address Wednesday, Obama said he will order U.S. air attacks across Syria's border without any coordination with the Syrian government, a proposition that Damascus has denounced as a violation of its sovereignty. Thus, the argument will surely soon be heard in Washington that Assad's government must be removed as a military prerequisite so the attacks on ISIS can proceed. Otherwise, there could be a threat to U.S. aircraft from Syria's air defenses.

That would get the neocons back on their original track of forcing "regime change" in countries seen as hostile to Israel. The first target was Iraq with Syria and Iran to follow. The goal was to deprive Israel's close-in enemies, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestine's Hamas, of crucial support. The neocon vision got knocked off track when Bush's Iraq War derailed and the American people balked at the idea of extending the conflict to Syria and Iran.

But the neocons never gave up on their vision. They simply kept at it, clinging to key positions inside Official Washington and recruiting "liberal interventionists" to the "regime change" cause. The neocons remained focused on Syria and Iran with hopes of getting U.S. bombing campaigns going against both countries. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Dangerous Neocon-R2P Alliance."]

The neocons' new hope has now arrived with the public outrage over ISIS's atrocities. Yet, while pushing to get this new war going, the neocons have downplayed their "regime change" agenda, getting Obama to agree only to extend his anti-ISIS bombing campaign from Iraq into Syria. But "regime change" in Damascus has remained a top neocon priority.

In a New York Times op-ed on Aug. 29, neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham avoided the “r-c” phrase couching their words about Syria’s civil war in the vague language of resolving the conflict, but clearly meaning that Assad must go.

The hawkish pair wrote that thwarting ISIS “requires an end to the [civil] conflict in Syria, and a political transition there, because the regime of President Bashar al-Assad will never be a reliable partner against ISIS; in fact, it has abetted the rise of ISIS, just as it facilitated the terrorism of ISIS’ predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq.”

Though the McCain-Graham depiction of Assad’s relationship to ISIS and al-Qaeda is a distortion at best – in fact, Assad’s army has been the most effective force in pushing back against the Sunni terrorist groups that have come to dominate the Western-backed rebel movement – the op-ed’s underlying point is obvious: an initial step in the U.S. military operation against ISIS must be “regime change” in Damascus.

Neocon Sleight-of-Hand

The neocons are also back to their old sleight-of-hand conflating the terrorists fighting the Assad government with the Assad government. In the op-ed, McCain and Graham cite Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson supposedly calling “Syria ‘a matter of homeland security’” – when he actually said in the linked speech from last February:

“We are very focused on foreign fighters heading to Syria. Based on our work and the work of our international partners, we know individuals from the U.S., Canada and Europe are traveling to Syria to fight in the conflict. At the same time, extremists are actively trying to recruit Westerners, indoctrinate them, and see them return to their home countries with an extremist mission.”

In other words, “Syria” was not the problem cited by Johnson but rather the “foreign fighters heading to Syria” and the possibility that they might “return to their home countries with an extremist mission.” The distinction is important, but McCain and Graham want to blur the threat to confuse Americans into seeing “Syria” as the problem, not the extremists.

A similar approach was taken by Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, one of the Obama administration’s top liberal war hawks. On Sept. 4, she sought to conflate recent allegations that Assad may not have surrendered all his chemical weapons with the possibility that any remaining weapons might fall into the hands of ISIS terrorists.

“Certainly if there are chemical weapons left in Syria, there will be a risk” that they could end up in the hands of ISIS, Power said. “And we can only imagine what a group like that would do if in possession of such a weapon.”

If any of these rhetorical tactics are ringing a bell, it’s because they are reminiscent of how the neocons frightened the American people into supporting the Iraq War in 2002-03. Back then, Bush administration officials blended unsubstantiated claims about Iraq’s WMDs with the prospect of them being shared with al-Qaeda.

In both cases – Iraq then and Syria now – the existence of those dangerous chemical weapons was in serious doubt and, even if they did exist, the two governments – of Saddam Hussein then and Bashar al-Assad now – were hostile to the Sunni fundamentalists in al-Qaeda and now its spinoff, ISIS.

Yet, this effort to confuse the American public – by manipulating their lack of knowledge about the power relationships in the Middle East – might work once more, by putting “black hats” on both Assad and ISIS and blurring the fact that they are bitter enemies.

In the weeks ahead, Assad also will surely be portrayed as obstructing the U.S. attacks on ISIS. He likely will be blamed for a lack of cooperation with the airstrikes even though it was the Obama administration that refused to coordinate with Assad’s government.

ISIL or ISIS?

Among anti-neocon “realists” inside the U.S. intelligence community, the concern about how these airstrikes into Syria might lead to dangerous mission creep is so great that I’m told that some senior analysts are even suspicious of President Obama’s repeated use of the acronym “ISIL” – for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – instead of the more common “ISIS,” referring only to Iraq and Syria.

The concern is that “the Levant” suggests a larger area including all “Mediterranean lands east of Italy,” that theoretically could include everything from Turkey to Palestine and Jordan to parts of Egypt. One source said inclusion of the phrase “ISIL,” instead of “ISIS,” in any “use of force” resolution could be significant by creating a possibility of a much wider war.

In his speech to the nation on Wednesday, Obama continued to use the acronym “ISIL” but his references to U.S. military operations were limited to Iraq and Syria.

The most controversial part of Obama’s speech was his open declaration to conduct cross-border attacks into Syria in clear violation of international law. He also vowed to increase military support for rebels fighting to overthrow the Assad government.

Obama declared that “we have ramped up our military assistance to the Syrian opposition” and he requested additional resources from Congress. He added: “We must strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists like ISIL, while pursuing the political solution necessary to solve Syria’s crisis once and for all,” a further suggestion that “regime change” is again in play.

Exactly what Obama thinks he can get from the Syrian opposition is a mystery, since he himself stated in an interview just last month that the notion that arming the supposedly “moderate” rebels would have made a difference in Syria has “always been a fantasy.”

He told the New York Times’ Thomas L. Friedman: “This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only

a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards.”

Nevertheless, Obama has now trotted out that old “fantasy” in connection with his plan to extend the war against ISIS into Syria. Obama also knows that many of the previous Syrian “moderates” who received U.S. weapons later unveiled themselves to be Islamists who repudiated the U.S.-backed opposition and allied themselves with al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, al-Nusra Front. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Syrian Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda.”]

What’s Up?

Given that record – and Obama’s knowledge of it – what is one to make of the deceptive formulation that he presented to the American people on Wednesday night?

One explanation could be that Obama plans a more direct – albeit secretive – U.S. role in removing Assad and putting a new regime into power in Damascus. Or Obama might be simply pandering to the neocons and liberal hawks who would have gone berserk if he had acknowledged the obvious, that the smart play is to work quietly with Assad to defeat ISIS and al-Nusra Front.

The other smart play might be for Obama to resume his behind-the-scenes cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin who helped engineer Syria’s agreement to surrender its chemical weapons arsenal last year and who could presumably broker a quiet agreement between Obama and Assad to allow the U.S. airstrikes now.

Though the U.S. neocons and “liberal interventionists” exploited the Ukraine crisis to drive a wedge between the two leaders, Obama might want to reconsider that estrangement and accept the help of Russia – as well as Iran – in achieving a goal that they all agree on: defeating ISIS and other Sunni terrorist groups. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis.”]

Yet, in Wednesday’s speech, Obama seemed to go out of his way to insult Putin by decrying “Russian aggression” in Ukraine where the U.S. government has accused Moscow of violating Ukraine’s sovereignty by crossing the border into eastern Ukraine and aiding ethnic Russian rebels. Obama claimed that Washington’s own intervention in Ukraine was “in support of the Ukrainian peoples’ right to determine their own destiny.”

Yet the realities in Kiev, whose government is backed by the U.S., and in Damascus, whose government is despised by Washington, have eerie parallels. In Syria, Assad, a longtime dictator, won a recent election that was truncated by civil strife. In Ukraine, the current government was established by a February coup d’état that overthrew an elected president and is now headed by a president elected by only a portion of the population, excluding much of the rebellious east.

Yet, in one country – Ukraine – the United States says outside intervention even by a neighbor to protect a population under military assault is illegal “aggression,” while in the other country –

Syria – it is entirely okay for the United States to send its military halfway around the world, cross Syria's borders to carry out bombing raids while also arming militants to overthrow the internationally recognized government.

Typically, neither Obama nor the U.S. mainstream press made note of the hypocrisy. But the bigger question now is will the neocons hijack Obama's bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria to achieve one of their most beloved goals, regime change in Damascus.