

Under Stiff Pressure, Obama Delays Syria Strikes

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Sept. 3—In a brief Rose Garden announcement Aug. 31, President Barack Obama delayed military action against Syria until after Congress has returned to Washington and voted on authorization for use of force. The last-minute decision was precipitated by a number of factors, including an outpouring of bipartisan Congressional demands for full debate and vote. All told, half the Members of the House of Representatives signed letters to the President, citing Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution, and the 1974 War Powers Resolution giving Congress the sole authority to go to war.

As of Aug. 30, the President had made the decision to order military strikes without authorization either from Congress or from the United Nations Security Council. Five U.S. guided-missile destroyers were in place in the eastern Mediterranean, and Pentagon sources indicated that there were 50-75 “high value” and infrastructure targets already selected for cruise-missile attack.

According to sources close to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sometime just before the President called off the attacks, JCS chairman Martin Dempsey, just returned from meetings with allied military commanders in Jordan, went to the President and warned him that the attack plans he had signed off on were likely to fail, and that there was a danger that the U.S. would be drawn deeper into the Syria mess. Under those circumstances, President Obama would be facing even stronger criti-

cism if he went ahead without first getting Congressional authorization. The sources indicated that Dempsey’s last-ditch effort to appeal to the President’s growing concern about his collapsing approval ratings clearly had an impact.

On the same day, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), a group of highly respected former U.S. intelligence officers from the CIA, DIA, State Department, and FBI, issued a widely circulated open letter to General Dempsey, calling on him to resign if the President ordered military strikes without Congressional approval (see *National*). In polls taken just days before the President’s shift, 80% of the American people opposed any U.S. military action against Syria, on the grounds that there were no vital U.S. interests at stake.

In fact, the hard core of Obama staffers who have been pushing for military action, with or without Congressional approval, are part of a “humanitarian interventionist” network that has been arguing, since the late 1990s, that the Westphalian system of national sovereignty was outmoded, and that under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, regime-change interventions were mandatory when governments attacked their people. R2P has no standing in international law. Key Obama advisors, including National Security Advisor Susan Rice and UN Ambassador Samantha Power, were reportedly urging Obama to attack Syria in order



State Dept.

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to set a precedent that "humanitarian interventions" do not require Congressional or UN approval.

Ultimately, the President decided that the risks of challenging an energized Congress were too great. Particularly after the British House of Commons voted against Prime Minister David Cameron's request for authority to join the U.S. in attacking Syria, it became even clearer that the President could find himself politically isolated.

Flimsy Evidence

On Aug. 30, Secretary of State John Kerry presented an unclassified intelligence community assessment that the Syrian government had been behind the chemical weapons attacks on Aug. 21 in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. However, Kerry's presentation and the four-page document prepared for public release by the Director of National Intelligence, Gen. James Clapper, were so devoid of details, and so reliant on a "trust me" assertion of evidence, that they did little to alter the massive public opposition to the planned military strikes.

In his Rose Garden announcement, made available later in the day by the White House, Obama said he would wait for Congress to return from recess on Sept. 9, to debate and vote on a resolution approving the use of military force. On Sept. 1, select Congressional leaders were given a classified briefing on the evidence as-

sembled from U.S. and allied intelligence agencies and private organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.

The evidence itself has been challenged repeatedly. Appearing on MSNBC Aug. 29, Gen. Barry McCaffrey (USA-ret.), a four-star who served in the Clinton White House, and commanded troops during the 1991 Operation Desert Storm, warned that the evidence was not sufficient to conclude that the Assad government had ordered the chemical weapons attacks. McCaffrey warned that the worst conceivable thing would be for evidence to surface in six months, revealing that Syrian rebels had carried out the attack as a "false flag" operation to draw the U.S. into the conflict.

Dale Gavlak, a Middle East-based correspondent for a number of international news organizations, wrote on Aug. 29 that eyewitnesses in the Damascus suburbs

where the CW attack occurred, said that *it was the rebels who had used the chemical weapons*, not government troops. Gavlak's account, based on interviews conducted by her co-author Yahya Ababneh, indicated that the CW cannisters were given to Syrian rebels through networks run by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the head of Saudi intelligence and the man in charge of Saudi support for the rebels, including hard-core jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front. Bandar, who initiated the Anglo-Saudi "al-Yamamah" barter arrangement, which created a massive offshore slush fund for black operations, has been deeply implicated in financing the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

Russians Not Convinced

Among the strongest attacks on the Administration's claims of proof that Assad carried out the chemical weapons attack are those from Russia, including President Putin himself.

In comments to reporters in Vladivostok Aug. 31, Putin ridiculed the notion that the regime would launch a chemical attack against opposition forces when, in fact, the benefit would go to the opposition. "Common sense speaks for itself," he said. "Syrian government troops are on the offensive. In some regions they have encircled the rebels. Under these conditions, the idea of giving a trump card to those who are constantly calling for foreign military intervention is utter non-

sense. It is not logical in the least; especially when it [the attack] coincides with the day UN inspectors arrived.”

“Therefore I am convinced that [the chemical attack] is nothing more than a provocation by those who want to drag other countries into the Syrian conflict, and who want the support of powerful members of the international community, especially the United States,” Putin continued. “I have no doubt about this.” As for the supposed evidence that the U.S. claims to have, Putin said, “Let them present it to UN inspectors and the Security Council. Claims that proof exists, but that it is classified and cannot be shown to anyone, are beneath criticism.” If the U.S. doesn’t produce any evidence, then, he said, “there is none.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry followed up Putin’s comments with a statement from spokesman Alexander Lukashevich, stating that a military strike against Syria, without the approval of the UN Security Council would be “inadmissible.” “No matter how ‘limited’ it is,” he said, “it will be a direct violation of international law; [it will] undermine the possibility to solve the conflict in Syria by political and diplomatic means; [and] it will bring about a new round of confrontation and casualties.”

Lukashevich noted that some U.S. allies are suggesting that any decision on Syria should be postponed until after the UN investigation team has completed its work and the results have been analyzed. “Threats of striking Syria are being issued instead of implementing the decision at the G-8 summit in Lough Erne [and] subsequent agreements to provide the UN Security Council with a comprehensive evaluation by UN experts, who are investigating the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria,” he said.

Even after U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul presented the Russian government with some of the so-called evidence, the Russians maintained their position. “What we were shown before and most recently by our American partners, as well as by the British and the French, absolutely does not convince us,” Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said at a university lecture in Moscow Sept. 2.

Although the U.S. showed Russia what it claimed was evidence, Lavrov said, “there was nothing concrete, [it was] without geographic coordinates or names.” The Foreign Minister added that “many experts” have expressed “serious doubts” about the validity of the video footage of the attack posted on the Inter-



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net. “If we are going to state that these are pictures of the use of chemical arms and of the effects on the victims, then there is a mass of disparities and absurdities,” Lavrov said. “There are very many doubts. There are no facts, just talk that ‘we probably know this.’ And when you ask for more detailed evidence, they say that it is all secret and they cannot show you. Thus, there are no such facts for the purposes of international cooperation.”

Only a Postponement

It must be emphasized that the Obama announcement has merely postponed the planned attacks. In fact, General Dempsey emphasized to the President that the war plan was not time-sensitive. Sometime soon after Congress returns and debates the war power authority, the same threat of military action by Obama will be back on the table. A growing chorus of military professionals have warned, along with both Dempsey and Lyndon LaRouche, that any military involvement by the United States in the Syria maelstrom can draw in other regional and global powers and can lead to World War III. In a memo issued Aug. 29, LaRouche argued that the threat of thermonuclear war being triggered by a U.S. attack on Syria was so grave, that the plans had to be cancelled altogether (see below).

So far, the world has bought a little time, but the clock is still ticking for a showdown of incalculable consequences, if Obama is not stopped by firm Congressional rejection of his authority to unilaterally wage war.