

USA & Syria: What's the War About?

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Against fierce public and political opposition, Team Obama is going all-out for a Congressional Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to bomb Syria. The term they're using is "flood the zone," but it's looking more like a "Hail Mary pass." So what is this about? Several things. First, Obama's credibility and, by extension, that of the U.S. imperial dictat, is at stake (more on this later).

Second, there's an element of stupidity and bungling. Presidential stupidity is never a fundamental cause of imperial adventures and debacles, but it's a factor. Stupidity was a factor in 1979 when Jimmy Carter, apparently on his own, allowed the deposed Shah of Iran into the USA; it was a factor way back when JFK took the CIA's bait to invade Cuba (Bay of Pigs, 1961); it was a factor when George W. Bush dissolved the Iraqi army in 2003, bringing about state collapse and sectarian mayhem there.

Bungling is a factor now around responding to the chemical weapons attack, particularly the U.S. refusal to recognize what should be obvious: (i) that Russia, not the U.S. or some scrawny COW ("Coalition of the Willing"), is the real key to stopping the Syrian regime from using forbidden weapons, and (ii) that Moscow is understandably enraged by having been suckered on Libya. Cruise missiles and B-52 bombers will not deter the Syrian regime, but Russia can tell Assad that it will pull the plug if chemical weapons are used again, making his regime a liability rather than an asset for Moscow.

The Russian government, of course, is acting overwhelmingly in Russia's state interests. Russian intelligence must have already known what German intelligence has reported, that the chemical weapons attack was apparently carried out by a Syrian military unit but not authorized by Assad. This doesn't absolve the regime and its leadership from criminal responsibility, but the point here is that any signs of weakening of the regime's command and control over chemical weapons must be freaky-scary for the Russians, as it should be for everyone.

Both the "imperial credibility" and "stupidity" factors have a common root. It's an assumption going back decades (elaborated as the "Carter doctrine" but earlier too) that U.S. military might is the key to the "stability" of the Middle East. (Israel fits into this equation, obviously.) But while the U.S. is of course the overwhelming military power, its capability to control and determine events is decreasing. The decline of U.S. power was greatly accelerated, qualitatively so, by the Iraq disaster. But the instinct remains to "prove our resolve," which in turn contributes to the tendency to bungling and stupidity.

Another element is the U.S. political gridlock and the administration's indecisiveness, even policy incoherence, on Syria, which gives McCain and the neocons the opening to insert their own agenda to which Obama has made himself hostage. That agenda remains as it has been under Bush-Cheney, to push toward confrontation with Iran. If this results in the destruction of Obama's presidency, that's an added benefit from their point of view. And Israel is lining up with the neocons on going after Iran—the Israeli goal is not to overthrow Assad (whom they prefer to the existing alternatives) in Syria but to take down Iran, ultimately by force. This has not been the Obama administration's strategic goal, at least in the short term.

The contradiction facing Team Obama now, which makes it all the harder to convince the public or ram through the AUMF, is on the one hand that a strictly "limited" strike will be strategically ineffectual and only reinforce the (correct) perception of declining U.S. hegemony. On the other hand, a massive strike that changes the balance of forces in the Syrian conflict might (i) strengthen the fundamentalist and al-Qaeda types, (ii) enrage the Russians to the point where they don't give Assad the ultimatum to enforce the no-chemical-weapons ban; (iii) push the new Iranian government away from bargaining and even toward a rush for nuclear weapons.

It is fashionable among the pro-bombing punditry to ascribe the opposition of the U.S. public to "war-weary isolationism." This is patronizing and one-sided at best. Yes, there is war-weariness after the Iraq debacle and the Afghan quagmire, but there is also genuine horror over the chemical weapons attack (yes, the Syrian military did it) and a feeling that "something needs to be done." And indeed, something needs to be done, but Team Obama can't coherently explain what it intends to accomplish because it doesn't even know. And the continuing slow-motion social catastrophe in America and the budget gridlock certainly contributes to the mood of rejection.

This is not a war that the ruling class is particularly enthused over either. Imperial prestige does matter, and there is the potential for Congressional disapproval to cripple a presidency, there really isn't a clearly identifiable U.S. "national security" stake here—not oil, not a terrorist threat, not even a threat to Israel. If anything, bombing Syria could push Iran in a more dangerous direction and create the small, but not trivial possibility of setting off a regional catastrophe by miscalculation or accident.

David Finkel, September 11, 2013

P.S.

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4000>