

Washington maneuvers in Syrian negotiations to lay groundwork for war

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As talks in Geneva between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov ended their second day Friday, there was no indication that an agreement had been reached on the proposal to place the chemical munitions of the Syrian government under international control in preparation for their destruction.

The US and Russian representatives met in the morning with Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN-Arab League special envoy on Syria to discuss bringing about the so-called “Geneva 2” conference for a negotiated settlement of Syria’s more than two-year-old civil war.

All three men gave brief statements referring to the talks as “constructive” and “useful,” but provided no insight into the content of their discussions.

In the three days since President Barack Obama delivered a nationally televised speech backing off from his threat to carry out an imminent—and illegal—military strike against Syria in favor of pursuing a “diplomatic path,” it has become increasingly evident that the main purpose of this path in Washington’s eyes is to pave a new road to war.

Internationally isolated, confronting overwhelming popular opposition at home and facing the prospect of a defeat on an authorization of the use of military force resolution in both houses of Congress, the Obama administration opted to publicly embrace the proposal of the Russian government for Syria’s chemical disarmament, hoping that the process would create a new pretext for war.

An insight into the thinking of Washington and its allies was provided by Poland’s foreign minister, who had publicly proposed a disarmament process in a newspaper interview last month and discussed the issue with Kerry the day before the US Secretary of State broached it in an answer to a question at a London news conference Monday as to whether there was any way that a US attack could be forestalled.

In an *Financial Times* interview the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski stressed that the chemical weapons agreement had to be concretized through a United Nations Security Council resolution that would “detail the plan, and also give the authorisation to use force if anybody cheats.”

With such a resolution, he continued, “...we get clear legal sanction for a strike if they breach their commitments.”

Given the opposition of Russia to any resolution authorizing military action against Syria and its veto power on the Security Council, Sikorski put the odds at getting a workable international agreement on the chemical weapons at “less than 50 per cent.”

But he added that “if, in the end, Russia doesn’t agree to a forceful resolution, we will have been sure that we have waited for the [UN weapons] inspectors’ report, we have given peace a chance, and therefore the case [for war] will be stronger to make before either the British or the American parliament.”

In other words, the pretense of “giving peace a chance” is designed to manufacture a better case for war.

France, which was the only country that indicated it was prepared to join the US in a war of aggression against Syria, has already drafted a resolution on Syrian chemical weapons for presentation to the Security Council. Reports indicate that the draft imposes accelerated and unrealistic deadlines and the threat that if Syria fails to meet them it will be subject to military attack, sanctioned under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter—the same authorization used to sanction the US-NATO war on Libya.

The French resolution would require that the Syrian government provide a full accounting of all chemical weapons and related facilities within 15 days, while the Chemical Weapons Convention, which the Assad regime signed this week, allows 60 days to make such an accounting.

The draft demands that the Syrian government “allow immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to any and all areas, facilities, equipment, records and means of transport.” Some reports have gone so far as to suggest that thousands of foreign troops would have to be deployed inside Syria to protect chemical weapons once they are turned over to international personnel.

French Foreign Ministry spokesman Philippe Lalliot said Friday that his government is not willing to allow Syrian disarmament to proceed through the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the body in charge of upholding the chemical weapons treaty.

Under the organization’s standards, cataloguing the Syrian weapons could take months and to even begin dismantling them could take up to two years, according to French estimates.

“It’s a time frame that is much longer than we expect,” Lalliot said. “If there were any breaches, they would need to be punished, otherwise resolutions would have no sense.”

The idea that the dismantling of chemical weapons stockpiles can be rushed flies in the face of all experience with the process. The US, for example, ratified the chemical weapons treaty in 1997. Sixteen years later, it still has a stockpile of more than 3,000 tons of such weapons—more than triple the alleged amount that Syria possesses—and the Pentagon projects that it will take another decade before they are all disposed of.

The process of dismantling such weapons is time-consuming and dangerous. Any attempt to place such work on a fast track carries with it the threat of catastrophic accidents that could claim many lives.

The French proposal also reportedly blames the Syrian regime for the August 21 attack—something for which no proof has been presented to the UN—and demands that those responsible be tried by the International Criminal Court.

The resolution is designed to create a series of triggers for military attack. Like similar conditions imposed on the government of Saddam Hussein before the US invasion of Iraq, it aims at forcing the Syrian government to prove the impossible, that it is not hiding a single chemical weapon within its territory, and creates the conditions for riding roughshod over the country’s sovereignty in order to better prepare a war for regime change.

The resolution is to be discussed at a meeting in Paris between Kerry, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and British Foreign Secretary William Hague on Monday, the same day that UN weapons inspectors who visited the

site of the August 21 chemical weapons attack outside Damascus are expected to release their report.

While it is anticipated that the UN report will confirm that a chemical weapon was responsible for deaths on that date, there is no indication that it will state who carried it out. The US and its allies have continuously stated as fact that the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad carried out the attack, without presenting a shred of verifiable evidence to support their charge.

The Syrian government has denied carrying out any such attack and indeed had no motive to do so on the very day that the UN weapons inspectors, invited into the country by Assad, were beginning their work just miles from where the chemical attack took place. Russia, meanwhile, has presented evidence linking the Western-backed Islamist militias fighting the Assad regime to this and previous attacks and charged that the US-backed “rebels” staged the August 21 incident, in order to blame it on the government and provoke US intervention in support of their flagging insurgency.

This assessment received further support Thursday as prosecutors in Turkey brought formal charges against a member of a Syrian Al-Qaeda-linked “rebel” group and five Turkish citizens for attempting to amass chemicals to be used in manufacturing sarin gas, the material believed to have been used in the chemical weapons attack outside Damascus on August 21.

The indictment charges that the Syrian, Hytham Qassap, had been working for the Al Nusra Front and another Islamist militia, the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, in setting up a network inside Turkey for procuring chemicals for use in producing deadly chemical weapons.

Qassap and his Turkish accomplices were arrested last May, when it was initially reported that the chemicals found in their possession had already been combined to make sarin gas. The case has received virtually no attention from the corporate media in the US.



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