

Obama renews threats as Syrian talks remain deadlocked

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As this week's second round of talks in Geneva remained at an impasse, US President Barack Obama yesterday renewed talk of possible military intervention against Syria, on the cynical pretext of "humanitarian" concern for the Syrian people.

Accompanied by French President Francois Hollande at a joint media conference in Washington, Obama declared there was "enormous frustration here" over the situation in Syria. While he discounted military intervention, for now, he ratcheted up the pressure on the Russian government to accept the removal of Syria's Assad regime.

"Right now we don't think that there is a military solution per se to the problem," Obama stated. "But the situation's fluid, and we are continuing to explore every possible avenue to solve this problem."

His remarks underscore the reality that the US and its allies remain committed to an agenda of regime-change. If the current talks, brokered by Russia, do not achieve that soon, then a military attack remains an option, as previously carried out in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Obama emphasised: "I always reserve the right to exercise military action on behalf of America's national security interests," adding only, "That has to be deployed wisely." He underscored Washington's insistence on the removal of President Bashar al-Assad's government, describing it as "crumbling." Obama said the conflict was "one of our highest national security priorities."

The US president also sought to intensify the pressure on Iran to prevail upon its Syrian ally to accede to Washington's dictates. Having initiated talks with Tehran in recent months, partly with a view to securing the US agenda in Syria, Obama declared that his administration would come down like "a ton of bricks" on firms that violated the still crippling sanctions imposed on Iran.

Five months ago, Obama and Hollande were on the brink of bombing Syria on the basis of utterly false

allegations, later exposed by a UN report, that the Assad regime used chemical weapons in towns near Damascus. Confronted by popular opposition, and with differences in US ruling circles over a new Middle Eastern war, Obama pulled back, seeking to create more favourable conditions for pursuing Washington's predatory interests in the Middle East and elsewhere, notably against China and Russia.

During the first round of the Geneva talks, which ended in failure last month, the US provocatively renewed US arms shipments to the Syrian "rebel" forces, but they have suffered further setbacks on the ground and there is intensifying fighting occurring between the Islamist militias themselves.

At yesterday's press conference, during which the two presidents hailed their two countries' "exceptionally" close alliance, Hollande also spoke of other "choices" if the Geneva negotiations did not result in Assad's removal. Hollande bluntly stated that the "only purpose" of the Geneva talks was to "make political transition possible."

This exposes the pretence that the Geneva talks are about "peace." The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition delegation in Geneva warned on Monday it would not return for a third round of talks if the Syrian government representatives did not agree to Assad's ouster as a pre-condition for negotiations. UN convenor Lakhdar Brahimi announced that the talks were proving just as "laborious" and unsuccessful as the previous round.

Hollande also revealed the aggressive agenda behind his and Obama's hypocritical claims to be dismayed by the plight of the Syrian people—whose suffering is the direct result of the nearly three year US-instigated war for regime-change. Hollande denounced the Russian government for opposing a proposed Western-sponsored UN Security Council resolution to supposedly increase

aid access to people trapped in the conflict. “How can you object to humanitarian corridors, why would you prevent the vote on a resolution if, in good faith, it is all about saving human lives?” he declared.

Such demands for military “corridors” and “no-fly zones”—ostensibly to protect civilians—have provided the trigger for repeated imperialist interventions over the past two decades, including the 2011 US-NATO war of aggression that ousted Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya. The draft UN resolution reportedly includes the threat of punitive sanctions. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday described the resolution as “absolutely one-sided” and “unacceptable” because it contained “an ultimatum for the government that if they don’t solve all this in two weeks then we automatically introduce sanctions.”

While the Western media has focussed sole attention on the plight of 1,100 war refugees trapped in besieged opposition-held areas of Homs, the responsibility for the humanitarian disaster in Syria lies above all with the “rebel” militias. Spawned and funded by the US and its collaborators, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they are carrying out massacres and laying siege to towns and villages, while engaged in ferocious in-fighting for territorial control. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is locked in battles with another coalition of Islamist militias led by the al-Nusra Front, which swears allegiance to Al Qaeda.

Even as the Geneva talks resumed on Monday, Islamist forces killed 20 civilians—including women and children—and 20 local fighters during an attack on the Alawite village of Maan in the central Syrian province of Hama. There were also reports that ISIL forces had been forced to withdraw from Syria’s oil-rich eastern province of Deir al-Zor after days of heavy fighting against its Islamist rivals. ISIL reportedly alienated the province’s population by imposing harsh rulings against dissent, such as beheadings, in areas it controlled.

The chemical weapons issue, temporarily downplayed after a Moscow-brokered disarmament pact was reached last September, is also being brought back to centre stage, with the Obama administration accusing the Assad government of stalling in meeting deadlines for the destruction of its stockpiles. The agency supervising the agreement, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), reported that a third shipment of chemicals was exported on Monday from the port of Latakia, despite the fighting raging in the country. Nevertheless, OPCW Director General Ahmet Uzumcu

warned against “further delays” in meeting the “concrete schedule” laid down in September.

In the US, two items in the *New York Times* signalled a shift to a more aggressive posture. A February 10 editorial backed the proposed UN resolution, declaring that the UN Security Council had “failed to respond to the bloodshed” in Syria, “largely because of Russia’s slavish allegiance to President Bashar al-Assad.”

Yesterday, the newspaper published an op-ed piece by two academics, Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi, accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “geostrategic calculations” and Assad’s “coldblooded recalcitrance” of standing in the way of “thousands of Syrian civilians eating.” Invoking the UN’s “responsibility to protect” doctrine, adopted in 2005 to sanctify imperialist interventions against targeted states, they declared: “And if a multinational force cannot be assembled, then at least some countries should step up and organize Syria’s democratically oriented rebel groups to provide the necessary force on the ground, with air cover from participating nations.”

This call for military intervention, and a confrontation with Russia, would no doubt find support from the pseudo-left groups, such as the US International Socialist Organisation and the French New Anti-capitalist Party, that have adopted similar appeals in acting as cheerleaders for the imperialist operations in Libya and Syria. Such demands for action in the name of humanitarianism have become vehicles for the continuing drive by the US to assert hegemony over the resource-rich and strategically critical Middle East and Central Asia.



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