

Obama's "60 Minutes" interview and the crisis of US policy in Syria

Barry Grey
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In an extraordinary interview Sunday evening on CBS News' "60 Minutes" program, President Barack Obama sought to defend his policy in Syria against a mounting chorus of detractors within the foreign policy and military/intelligence establishment who are demanding an even more massive and reckless military escalation than that which he has authorized.

Under aggressive, bordering on belligerent, questioning from "60 Minutes" moderator Steve Kroft, Obama was unable to present a coherent explanation of either the purpose of the war in Syria or the reasons for the fiasco thus far of Washington's four-year drive to topple the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The interview was broadcast a week after Russia launched a military intervention to prop up the Assad regime against the US-backed Islamist militias. These militias form the backbone of the so-called "rebels" carrying out the war for regime-change on the ground.

Conducted at the White House on October 6, the interview was aired just two days after Obama announced that he was ending the Pentagon's disastrous yearlong attempt to recruit and train a "moderate" force to fight both Assad and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL), and was instead increasing US arms and air support for existing "rebel" militias. What Obama did not say was that these forces are dominated by Al Qaeda-affiliated groups such as the al-Nusra Front, which the US State Department lists as a foreign terrorist organization.

Obama's announcement, far from a military retreat, marked an escalation of the American intervention in Syria, one that threatens to trigger a direct conflict with Russia, the possessor of the world's second biggest nuclear arsenal after the US.

These steps, however, are deemed woefully inadequate within broad sections of the state and political establishment, including layers of the Democratic Party. What the "60 Minutes" interview revealed is the disarray and crisis of US policy and the existence of bitter divisions within the ruling elite. Powerful factions are pushing for the deployment of thousands of US troops to take out Assad, regardless the risks of war with Russia and the possibility of a Third World War.

One expression of the depths of the political crisis over Washington's debacle in Syria and the broader Middle East

was the inquisitorial posture adopted by Kroft. He repeatedly interrupted Obama and bluntly listed the failures of his policy.

Within the first minute of the interview, Kroft declared, "I mean, if you look at the situation and you're looking for progress, it's not easy to find. You could make the argument that the only thing that's changed is the death toll, which has continued to escalate, and the number of refugees fleeing Syria into Europe."

When Obama attempted to answer a question, he interjected, "I mean, what's going on right now is not working. I mean, they [ISIS] are still occupying big chunks of Iraq. They're still occupying a good chunk of Syria. Who's going to get rid of them?"

On the Pentagon's failed program to create a "moderate" anti-ISIS and anti-Assad militia, Croft said, "You have been talking about the moderate opposition in Syria. It seems very hard to identify... You got a half a billion dollars from Congress to train and equip 5,000, and at the end, according to the commander of CENTCOM, you got 50 people, most of whom are dead or deserted. He said four or five left?"

In response, Obama made the astonishing admission that he did not believe in the program from the beginning. The following exchange took place:

Obama: "Steve, this is why I've been skeptical from the get go about the notion that we were going to effectively create this proxy army inside of Syria. My goal has been to try to test the proposition, can we be able to train and equip a moderate opposition that's willing to fight ISIL? And what we've learned is that as long as Assad remains in power, it is very difficult to get those folks to focus their attention on ISIL."

Kroft: "If you were skeptical of the program to find and identify, train and equip moderate Syrians, why did you go through the program?"

Obama: "Well, because part of what we have to do here, Steve, is to try different things..."

Aside from the virtual acknowledgment that his policy lacked any coherence, Obama's attempt at an explanation for the failure of the Pentagon plan amounted to an admission that his administration's claims of the existence of a "moderate" anti-Assad military force were fraudulent. The only significant forces fighting to overthrow Assad are and always have been

Islamist elements linked to Al Qaeda.

Kroft was careful not to press this point because it shatters the pretense that the bloody wars waged by Washington and its regional allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen—which have taken well over a million lives and destroyed entire societies—were carried out to fight terrorism.

On Russia's intervention in Syria, Kroft was no less adversarial. Here is an excerpt from the interview:

Kroft: "Mr. Putin seems to be challenging [American] leadership."

Obama: "In what way?"

Kroft: "Well, he's moved troops into Syria, for one. He's got people on the ground. Two, the Russians are conducting military operations in the Middle East for the first time since World War II, bombing the people that we are supporting..."

"He's challenging your leadership, Mr. President. He's challenging your leadership..."

"There is a perception in the Middle East among our adversaries, certainly and even among some of our allies that the United States is in retreat, that we pulled our troops out of Iraq and ISIS has moved in and taken over much of that territory. The situation in Afghanistan is very precarious and the Taliban is on the march again. And ISIS controls a large part of Syria."

Obama's response to this accurate description of the present situation in the Middle East was both highly revealing and ominous. After a half-hearted attempt to argue for a political settlement to transition Assad out of power—this supposedly being the only basis for defeating ISIS—he focused on the alternative being advanced within the ruling class to his reluctance to deploy large number of US troops.

Obama: "I guarantee you that there are factions inside of the Middle East, and I guess factions inside the Republican Party, who think that we should send endless numbers of troops into the Middle East, that the only measure of strength is sending back several hundred thousands troops, that we are going to impose a peace, police the region, and—that the fact that we might have more deaths of US troops, thousands of troops killed, thousands of troops injured, spending another trillion dollars, they would have no problem with that. There are people who would like to see us do that..."

"And if, in fact, the only measure is for us to send another 100,000 or 200,000 troops into Syria or back into Iraq, or perhaps into Libya, or perhaps into Yemen, and our goal somehow is that we are now going to be, not just the police, but the governors of the region, that would be a bad strategy, Steve."

These words should be taken as a warning by working people and youth in the US and internationally. Here Obama blurted out what is being intensively discussed and planned in the offices of the CIA, the Pentagon and various corporate boardrooms.

These plans for greater conquest and empire cannot be carried

out by the forces available in a volunteer army, especially when American imperialism is preparing for even greater wars against rivals such as Russia, China and, eventually, potential challengers to US supremacy such as Germany and Japan. They require the reintroduction of the draft, to dragoon untold thousands of youth to serve as cannon fodder in the American ruling class's manic pursuit of global domination.

These words describe a policy of all-out war that, opposed for the present by Obama on the basis of tactical considerations, is nevertheless the inevitable and logical outcome of the entire foreign policy of US imperialism, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union nearly 25 years ago.

From the first Gulf War launched in 1991 by George H.W. Bush under the banner of America's "New World Order," to the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria and the latest war in Yemen, American imperialism has single-mindedly pursued a policy of world hegemony, seeking to utilize its military superiority to offset its economic decline.

This policy has produced one disaster after another, the Syrian debacle joining the creation of a regime in Iraq that aligns itself with Russia and Iran and the installation of a hated and despised puppet government in Afghanistan that cannot survive without the permanent presence of thousands of US troops.

American imperialism will not, however, accept its eclipse by one or another rival power. The crisis of US policy in Syria and the broader Middle East makes all the more urgent the building of a new antiwar movement based on the working class united internationally in the struggle against capitalism.



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