

Obama: No end to Syria war without regime change

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President Barack Obama declared Friday that the US is not prepared to end the more than four-year-old war that has killed roughly a quarter million people in Syria, without first securing the downfall of the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

“I do not foresee a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power,” Obama told the media on the sidelines of a trade summit in Manila.

The president’s remarks appeared to contradict the assertion just days earlier by Secretary of State John Kerry in Paris that a Syrian ceasefire is just “weeks away.”

In the wake of the Paris terror attacks as well as Moscow’s conclusion that a Russian passenger jet had been brought down by a bomb over Egypt’s Sinai peninsula last month, there has been a flurry of discussions on organizing a united and multilateral intervention in Syria focused on destroying the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The United Nations Security Council Friday unanimously passed a French-initiated resolution declaring that ISIS “constitutes a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security,” and calling on member states to “redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL [ISIS] also known as Da’esh as well as ANF [Al Nusra Front], and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups.”

The UN measure was passed after an earlier draft submitted by Russia, calling for the coordination of the fight against ISIS in Syria with the Syrian government, was roundly rejected by Washington and its allies. The resolution passed Friday was largely symbolic, failing to invoke Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which allows

member states to carry out military action. The US has been carrying out such action in its bombing of Syria for over a year, with no legal sanction.

Despite the show of unity at the UN, Obama’s remarks make clear that Washington is not ceding the strategic aims it has pursued since it helped instigate the civil war in Syria in 2011, terrorist attacks or no terrorist attacks. It demands the ouster of Assad and wants to install a pliant puppet regime in Damascus in order to further its drive to assert US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking on the same day as Obama, derided “the pointlessness of that line, that ultimatum, basically, that if Assad leaves, all problems will be solved.” He said that Russia was prepared to cooperate with the US and its allies in Syria on the conditions that they “respect Syria’s sovereignty and the prerogatives of the Syrian leadership.”

While the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin has indicated it is prepared to support a “transition” that ends with Assad leaving power, it has rejected Assad’s removal as a “precondition” for any negotiated agreement. It is determined to defend the interests of the Russian state and ruling oligarchy in Syria, which provides Moscow with its only military bases outside the former Soviet Union and is strategically important in terms of energy pipeline routes that could significantly affect the Russian economy and the bottom line of its biggest corporation, Gazprom.

Thus, the US and Russia continue to pursue diametrically opposed aims even as both sides are significantly escalating their military interventions in the war-torn country, increasing the danger of an armed conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated on

Thursday that Washington is prepared to change its “rules of engagement” in Syria in order to escalate the American intervention. “The president has indicated he’s prepared to do more, including on the ground,” Carter said.

The first indication of the changed US “rules of engagement” has apparently been the targeting of fuel trucks transporting oil from fields in areas under ISIS control.

“We’ve increased the targeting of ISIL oil infrastructure in recent days with great success in targeting trucks that were carrying oil that brings significant amounts of revenue to ISIL,” White House Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told the *Washington Times*.

Speaking on MSNBC, Carter added: “We’re prepared to change the rules of engagement. We’ve changed tactics, as we just did with the case of the fuel trucks.” He said that in the past month, US airstrikes have hit over 150 targets in oil-producing regions under ISIS control, including more than 100 fuel tanker trucks.

Even as US officials were touting these new airstrikes, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that US-led airstrikes on fuel trucks near the ISIS de facto capital of Raqa, had killed at least six civilians and wounded 20. The victims of the bombings were not ISIS fighters, but rather oil smugglers who have long operated in the region.

Meanwhile, the US Air Force Central Command Friday acknowledged that a US air strike conducted in Iraq last March had killed four civilians, including a child. Thus far, the Pentagon has admitted to very few such killings, though dozens of similar incidents are reportedly under investigation.

For its part, Russia Friday reported that its military had fired 18 cruise missiles at targets in Syria from warships deployed in the Caspian Sea. It was the fourth day of cruise missile attacks. Moscow has also doubled the number of warplanes operating in Syria to 69.

Tensions between Russia and Turkey over the Russian air campaign surfaced again on Friday, when the Turkish government summoned the Russian ambassador to the foreign ministry to receive a formal protest over airstrikes that Ankara claimed were “very close” to the Turkish border and could lead to “serious consequences.”

Previously Ankara had protested alleged Russian incursions into Turkish air space and had issued warnings against Moscow arming Kurdish militias fighting ISIS in Syria.

Turkey, along with other close US regional allies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have served as the main source of funding, arms and support for the Sunni Islamist militias, including ISIS, in the fight to topple the Assad government in Syria.



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