

Obama Revisits Military Option on Syria

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The United States' narrative on Syria dramatically changed during the past fortnight. President Barack Obama has publicly discussed the military option on Syria.

An unseen hand would seem to have stealthily reshuffled the order of the heap of Syrian files stacked up on his desk in the Oval Office and brought to the fore the «all-options-are-open» file dated August 31 last year, which was when Obama stalled on his plan to launch a «limited» attack on Syria and took the detour to seek approval from the US Congress for use of military force to «deter, disrupt, prevent and degrade» the potential for chemical attacks in Syria.

In two highly publicized testimonies by US spy chiefs at two senate hearings during the past fortnight, the Obama administration worked on the American public's awareness of the Syrian situation. Simultaneously, it also disclosed through media leaks that with Congressional approval, the US has been supplying weapons to Syrian rebels.

Between the two Senate hearings, the Obama administration sized up the al-Qaeda problem in Syria. The National Intelligence Director James Clapper assessed that the strength of the Syrian opposition fighting inside Syria is estimated at anywhere between 75000 to 115000 fighters out of which «somewhere in the neighborhood of between 20000 and maybe up to a top range of 26000 we [US intelligence] regard as extremists. And they are disproportionately influential because they are among the most effective fighters on the battlefield».

The message to the American public was three-fold:

- Al-Qaeda is making Syria its main operational base.
- The «homeland security» is threatened insofar as extremists are being trained in camps with specific plans to attack America and its allies.
- The Syrian conflict threatens to be a protracted one posing grave dangers to international security and the US' vital interests.

Besides, certain allegations were also made at the senate hearings: a) Syrian government is dragging feet in implementing the accord on chemical weapons; b) an «apocalyptic disaster» (to use Clapper's expression) threatens Syria in terms of the humanitarian crisis and appalling level of civilian casualty; and, c) in Clapper's «professional opinion», Syrian government has committed large scale atrocities.

Clapper assessed that any expectations out of the Geneva 2 conference need to be «pretty modest» and prospects for a long-term political solution to the three-year-long conflict

remain «problematic».

He highlighted that among foreign fighters present in Syria, there are al-Qaeda veterans from Afghanistan and Pakistan who aspire to attack Europe and the US. In sum, the Senate hearings served to flag in the domestic opinion the imperative need for the US to act on Syria.

Clearly, the synergy that has developed between the Obama administration and the Capitol on Syria found reflection on the visit of the French President Francois Hollande to Washington this week. What emerges is that Obama would see Hollande as just the right man at the moment to take on the kind of risks in Syria (or Lebanon) that, say, British Prime Minister David Cameron or German Chancellor Angela Merkel would want to avoid. Indeed, Hollande has piled up a good track record on military interventions abroad – Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic.

The French interventions seem to impress Obama who is reluctant to engage militarily in overseas conflicts because of a tightening budget and the war-weariness among the American public. When it comes to Syria, Hollande also happens to be a close ally of Saudi Arabia and France claims it to be a historical legacy – and an obligation – to play a lead role in the affairs of the Levant. Needless to say, French commercial interests are very substantial, too.

In sum, France has overnight become the US' best ally in Europe «at least as seen through the prism of crisis management and military cooperation,» as the prominent French pundit Frederic Bozo sardonically noted. Indeed, Obama can be a very charming man if he wants to.

He ensured the whole works for Hollande knowing how much the French love pomp – a warm reception with Michelle Obama by his side on the White House lawns (although Hollande is a confirmed bachelor), ceremonial guard of honor, gala state dinner attended by 300 invitees, a rare ride on Air Force One, conducted tour of Thomas Jefferson's plantation estate outside Charlottesville, Virginia, and an effusive welcome speech where Obama said, «What I do believe, is that the US-French alliance has never been stronger, and the levels of cooperation that we're seeing across a whole range of issues is much deeper than it was, I think, five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago».

Put differently, the lengthy references to the Syrian conflict at the joint press conference by Obama and Hollande following the bilateral talks on Tuesday carry great resonance and must be noted carefully.

Obama conveyed four things. First and foremost, he marked a distance between the US and Russia on the Syrian problem. He differentiated the US stance and put the onus on Russia to ensure Syrian government's compliance with the chemical weapons accord. He implied that Russia has been blocking humanitarian aid from reaching beleaguered Syrian communities caught up in the crossfire. Obama used exceptionally harsh words, «Russia a holdout. And Secretary [of State John] Kerry and others have delivered a very direct message to the Russians».

Secondly, Obama expressed skepticism whether the Geneva 2 process adds up to anything. He reiterated Washington's resolve to «strengthen the moderate [Syrian] opposition». Thirdly, Obama claimed a US-French concord on Syria: «It is bad for global security that

there are extremists who have moved into the vacuum in certain portions of Syria in a way that could threaten us over the long term. So this is one of our highest national security priorities, and I know that Francois [Hollande] feels the same way».

Finally, Obama discussed the moribund military option in Syria. He underscored his «enormous frustration» over the Syrian stalemate and said, «I always reserve the right to exercise military action on behalf of America's national security interests. But that has to be deployed wisely... right now we don't think there is a military solution, per se, to the problem. But the situation is fluid, and we are continuing to explore every possible avenue to solve this problem».

The Washington Post newspaper has since reported quoting US officials that there are «internal discussions» going on within the Obama administration as to the «extent of the president's powers to use lethal force against terrorist organizations» in Syria. It quoted the Pentagon's press secretary Rear Adm. John Kirby insisting that the US military «currently has the necessary authority, under domestic and international law, to meet the threat posed by al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations».

However, it seems improbable that the US can ever secure a mandate from the UN Security Council to undertake a direct military intervention in Syria. Nor is it likely that such an intervention is on Obama's mind at the moment.

What, then, is the game plan? One explanation could be that Washington hopes to apply maximum pressure on the Syrian regime to step aside and make way for a transitional set-up in Damascus with President Bashar al-Assad simply doing the right thing by walking into the sunset. According to Obama's version, his threat of a limited strike on Syria only prompted Moscow and Damascus to scramble and produce the accord on chemical weapons last year. He probably hopes for a repeat performance.

On the other hand, a very good case is also being made by the Obama administration through the past fortnight before the US domestic audience, which continues to be war-weary, that some sort of intervention in Syria is becoming necessary because national security is in the crosshairs.

It is entirely conceivable that Obama may order US drone strikes on targets in Syria at some stage. Which, of course, will begin with al-Qaeda targets but could always be extended incrementally to tilt the military balance in favor of the wider agenda of regime change...

This is where Hollande's recent visit to Turkey, the first by a French leader in the past 22 years, becomes significant. To be sure, all indications are that the Obama administration is switching back to muscular diplomacy on Syria.

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