

Reported US-Syrian Accord on Air Strikes

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Global Research, September 18, 2014

[Consortium News](#) 17 September 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

The Obama administration, working through the Russian government, has secured an agreement from the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad to permit U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State targets in parts of Syria, according to a source briefed on the secret arrangements.

The reported agreement would clear away one of the chief obstacles to President Barack Obama's plan to authorize U.S. warplanes to cross into Syria to attack Islamic State forces – the concern that entering Syrian territory might prompt anti-aircraft fire from the Syrian government's missile batteries.

The usual protocol for the U.S. military – when operating in territory without a government's permission – is to destroy the air defenses prior to conducting airstrikes so as to protect American pilots and aircraft, as was done with Libya in 2011. However, in other cases, U.S. intelligence agencies have arranged for secret permission from governments for such attacks, creating a public ambiguity usually for the benefit of the foreign leaders while gaining the necessary U.S. military assurances.

In essence, that appears to be what is happening behind the scenes in Syria despite the hostility between the Obama administration and the Assad government. Obama has called for the removal of Assad but the two leaders find themselves on the same side in the fight against the Islamic State terrorists who have battled Assad's forces while also attacking the U.S.-supported Iraqi government and beheading two American journalists.

In a national address last week, Obama vowed to order U.S. air attacks across Syria's border without any coordination with the Syrian government, a proposition that Damascus denounced as a violation of its sovereignty. So, in this case, Syria's behind-the-scenes acquiescence also might provide some politically useful ambiguity for Obama as well as Assad.



Image: President Barack Obama in his weekly address on Sept. 13, 2014, vowing to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. (White House Photo)

Yet, this secret collaboration may go even further and include Syrian government assistance in the targeting of the U.S. attacks, according to the source who spoke on condition of anonymity. That is another feature of U.S. military protocol in conducting air strikes – to have some on-the-ground help in pinpointing the attacks.

As part of its public pronouncements about the future Syrian attacks, the Obama administration sought \$500 million to train “vetted” Syrian rebels to handle the targeting tasks inside Syria as well as to carry out military ground attacks. But that approach – while popular on Capitol Hill – could delay any U.S. airstrikes into Syria for months and could possibly negate Assad’s quiet acceptance of the U.S. attacks, since the U.S.-backed rebels share one key goal of the Islamic State, the overthrow of Assad’s relatively secular regime.

Just last month, Obama himself termed the strategy of arming supposedly “moderate” Syrian rebels “a fantasy.” He told the New York Times’ Thomas L. Friedman:

“This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards.”

Obama’s point would seem to apply at least as much to having the “moderate” rebels face down the ruthless Islamic State jihadists who engage in suicide bombings and slaughter their captives without mercy. But this “fantasy” of the “moderate” rebels has a big following in Congress and on the major U.S. op-ed pages, so Obama has included the \$500 million in his war plan despite the risk it poses to Assad’s acquiescence to American air attacks.

Neocon Wish List

Without Assad’s consent, the U.S. airstrikes might require a much wider U.S. bombing campaign to first target Syrian government defenses, a development long sought by Official Washington’s influential neoconservatives who have kept “regime change” in Syria near the top of their international wish list.

For the past several years, the Israeli government also has sought the overthrow of Assad, even at the risk of Islamic extremists gaining power. The Israeli thinking had been that Assad, as an ally of Iran, represented a greater threat to Israel because his government was at the center of the so-called Shiite crescent reaching from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut and southern Lebanon, the base for Hezbollah.

The thinking was that if Assad’s government could be pulled down, Iran and Hezbollah – two of Israel’s principal “enemies” – would be badly damaged. A year ago, then-Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren articulated this geopolitical position in [an interview](#) with the Jerusalem Post.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren said. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the other “bad

guys” were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

More recently, however, with the al-Qaeda-connected Nusra Front having seized Syrian territory adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights – forcing [the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers](#) – the balance of Israeli interests may be tipping in favor of preferring Assad to having Islamic extremists possibly penetrating directly into Israeli territory.

Direct attacks on Israel would be a temptation to al-Nusra Front, which is competing for the allegiance of young jihadists with the Islamic State. While the Islamic State, known by the acronyms ISIS or ISIL, has captured the imaginations of many youthful extremists by declaring the creation of a “caliphate” with the goal of driving Western interests from the Middle East, al-Nusra could trump that appeal by actually going on the offensive against one of the jihadists’ principal targets, Israel.

Yet, despite Israel’s apparent rethinking of its priorities, America’s neocons appear focused still on their long-held strategy of using violent “regime change” in the Middle East to eliminate governments that have been major supporters of Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestine’s Hamas, i.e. Syria and Iran.

One reason why Obama may have opted for a secretive overture to the Assad regime, using intelligence channels with the Russians as the middlemen, is that otherwise the U.S. neocons and their “liberal interventionist” allies would have howled in protest.

The Russian Hand

Besides the tactical significance of U.S. intelligence agencies arranging Assad’s tacit acceptance of U.S. airstrikes over Syrian territory, the reported arrangement is also significant because of the role of Russian intelligence serving as the intermediary.

That suggests that despite the U.S.-Russian estrangement over the Ukraine crisis, the cooperation between President Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin has not been extinguished; it has instead just gone further underground.

Last year, this subterranean collaboration between Obama and Putin represented a potential tectonic geopolitical shift in the Middle East. In the short term, their teamwork produced agreements that averted a U.S. military strike against Syria last September (by getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal) and struck a tentative deal with Iran to constrain but not eliminate its nuclear program.

In the longer term, by working together to create political solutions to various Mideast crises, the Obama-Putin cooperation threatened to destroy the neocons’ preferred strategy of escalating U.S. military involvement in the region. There was the prospect, too, that the U.S.-Russian tag team might strong-arm Israel into a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

So, starting last September – almost immediately after Putin helped avert a U.S. air war against Syria – key neocons began taking aim at Ukraine as a potential sore point for Putin. A leading neocon, Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, took to the op-ed pages of the neocon Washington Post to identify Ukraine as “the biggest prize” and explaining how its targeting could undermine Putin’s political standing inside Russia.

“Ukraine’s choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian

imperialism that Putin represents,” Gershman [wrote](#). “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.” At the time, Gershman’s NED was funding scores of political and media projects inside Ukraine.

By early 2014, American neocons and their “liberal interventionist” pals were conspiring “to midwife” a coup to overthrow Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovych, according to a phrase used by U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in [an intercepted phone conversation](#) with Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who was busy handpicking leaders to replace Yanukovych.

A neocon holdover from George W. Bush’s administration, Nuland had been a top aide to Vice President Dick Cheney and is married to prominent neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for a New American Century which prepared the blueprint for the neocon strategy of “regime change” starting with the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

The U.S.-backed coup ousted Yanukovych on Feb. 22 and sparked a bloody civil war, leaving thousands dead, mostly ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine. But the Gershman-Nuland strategy also drove a deep wedge between Obama and Putin, seeming to destroy the possibility that their peace-seeking collaboration would continue in the Middle East. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons’ Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit.”](#)]

New Hope for ‘Regime Change’

The surprise success of Islamic State terrorists in striking deep inside Iraq during the summer revived neocon hopes that their “regime change” strategy in Syria might also be resurrected. By baiting Obama to react with military force not only in Iraq but across the border in Syria, neocons like Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham put the ouster of Assad back in play.

In a [New York Times op-ed](#) on Aug. 29, McCain and Graham used vague language about resolving the Syrian civil war, but clearly implied that Assad must go. They wrote that thwarting ISIS

“requires an end to the [civil] conflict in Syria, and a political transition there, because the regime of President Bashar al-Assad will never be a reliable partner against ISIS; in fact, it has abetted the rise of ISIS, just as it facilitated the terrorism of ISIS’ predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq.”

Though the McCain-Graham depiction of Assad’s relationship to ISIS and al-Qaeda was a distortion at best – in fact, Assad’s army has been the most effective force in pushing back against the Sunni terrorist groups that have come to dominate the Western-backed rebel movement – the op-ed’s underlying point is obvious: a necessary step in the U.S. military operation against ISIS must be “regime change” in Damascus.

That would get the neocons back on their original track of forcing “regime change” in countries seen as hostile to Israel. The first target was Iraq with Syria and Iran always meant to follow. The idea was to deprive Israel’s close-in enemies, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestine’s Hamas, of crucial support. But the neocon vision got knocked off track when Bush’s Iraq War derailed and the American people balked at extending the conflict to Syria and Iran.

Still, the neocons retained their vision even after Bush and Cheney departed. They remained influential by holding onto key positions inside Official Washington – at think tanks, within major news outlets and even inside the Obama administration. They also built a crucial alliance with “liberal interventionists” who had Obama’s ear. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Dangerous Neocon-R2P Alliance](#).”]

The neocons’ new hope arrived with the public outrage over ISIS’s atrocities. Yet, while pushing to get this new war going, the neocons have downplayed their “regime change” agenda, getting Obama to agree only to extend his anti-ISIS bombing campaign from Iraq into Syria. But it was hard to envision expanding the war into Syria without ousting Assad.

Now, however, if the source’s account is correct regarding Assad’s quiet assent to U.S. airstrikes, Obama may have devised a way around the need to bomb Assad’s military, a maneuver that might again frustrate the neocons’ beloved goal of “regime change.”

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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