

Syria: Diplomacy and the Ongoing Danger of a U.S. Attack

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

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Developments concerning Syria continue to move very quickly. On Saturday, September 14, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced their governments had reached an agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons.

It reportedly called for the Syrian government to disclose its chemical weapons stockpile within a week, and for international inspectors to be on the ground in Syria by November to enforce the agreement.

This comes less than a week after President Barack Obama was openly preparing for a military assault on Syria and following a week of intense political and diplomatic struggle on the international stage and within the U.S. ruling class—as well as widespread opposition to war among the people.

The agreement is being spun as, and might mean, the threat of a U.S. military strike has receded—at least for the time being. (The U.S., Russia, and other world powers may also be struggling out other, broader plans concerning Syria and the Middle East behind the scenes.) At the same time, the rulers of the U.S. and their media are working to set terms where at any moment they can declare that the Syrians or other parties are not living up to whatever the U.S. says has been agreed on, and the U.S. could launch a military strike justified with claims that they had gone the last mile in diplomacy first.

This latest turn toward an internationally imposed “diplomatic” approach to the horrific crisis in Syria was greeted by many progressives with a sigh of relief, labeling it a rejection of war in favor of diplomacy. William Rivers Pitt, Truthout: “It is a refreshing change of pace to see diplomacy at work after so many years of bomb first and ask questions later...” Or Robert Naiman, also on Truthout: “With War Off the Table, It's Time for Syria Cease-Fire, Negotiations and Talking to Iran.” Then a joint statement by Jesse Jackson and Phyllis Bennis: “From War to Peace: Forceful Diplomacy, Not Military Force in Syria.” (Common Dreams and elsewhere)

This is NOT what's happening. Whatever agreements are being hammered out by that cabal of rival imperialist states, big powers, and other reactionary regimes otherwise known as the United Nations or the “international community” are being done to suit their interests, not those of humanity. So fairy tales and delusions about turning from “war to peace,” and the wonders of “diplomacy at work” aren't hopeful—they're harmful! The only thing they will disarm—politically and ideologically—are those people who are influenced by them,

obscuring reality and weakening resistance.

First, events—which have been unfolding very rapidly—could bring the “military option” front and center again, and Obama has made clear that military action is still “on the table”—with or without UN authorization.

Second, what is taking place is not a step toward eliminating horrific weapons of mass destruction. What’s taking place is that the tyrannical, murderous regime of a small, oppressed country is being forced under threat of bombardment to partially disarm by reactionary powers with far, far, far greater arsenals of death and destruction—including nuclear weapons that are qualitatively more savage and dangerous than chemical weapons—precisely in order to preserve their monopoly over these weapons of cataclysmic death and destruction.

Third, the Obama team may be calculating that because it lacks any good or easy options in Syria, striking this deal can be to its advantage, including because by appearing to “give peace a chance” it can build greater support for a possible military assault later if that is deemed necessary.

Fourth, as all this—and decades of history—shows, U.S. diplomacy, negotiations, and arms inspections—like military actions—are all about imperialism, nothing else. They don’t represent an attempt to arrive at a “fair” or “just” resolution of conflicts or to abolish weapons of mass destruction. Conducting diplomacy, and seeking various negotiated agreements, including at times around arms inspections and disarmament, are all part of the “tool kit” the U.S. employs to carry out and advance its global interests and strategy for domination and control. Nor do these means represent a repudiation of military violence—just the opposite. These efforts are based on, backed up, and enforced by the threat or use of military force—and they can murder just as many people as wars can!

Lessons from Iraq: The “Price” of Sanctions & Weapons Inspections

In light of the agreement for the “international community” to supervise the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons, it’s important to learn from the experience of U.S. and UN “diplomacy” and “arms inspections” in Iraq from 1990 to 2003. This is a case study in what imperialist diplomacy, agreements, and “arms control” are really all about—and what they mean for the people!

In 1990, draconian economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq, supposedly simply to force it to withdraw from Kuwait, which Iraq had invaded in August.

In April 1991, following 43 days of massive bombardment, the U.S.-led coalition forced Iraq, then under Saddam Hussein, to agree to UN Resolution 687, forcing it to reveal and destroy its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs, and to submit to extremely intrusive international inspections to verify compliance.

Iraq’s alleged failure to fully comply with UN Resolution 687 and fully cooperate with UN weapons inspectors were the primary rationalizations for 12 murderous years of U.S.-imposed economic sanctions and near-war with Iraq. In 2002-2003, these charges morphed into the Bush regime’s primary justification for preemptive war.

In fact, within six months of the end of the 1991 Gulf War, Iraqi weapons programs were being discovered and destroyed. Iraq may have destroyed all its weapons of mass destruction by the early 1990s, according to a high-level defector, and certainly by the late 1990s. In October 1998, the International Atomic Energy Agency certified that Iraq had provided it with a “full, final, and complete” account of its nuclear weapons programs, and that the agency had found no evidence of any prohibited nuclear activities since October 1997.

A year later, the UN Security Council’s disarmament panel concluded, “Although important elements still have to be resolved, the bulk of Iraq’s proscribed weapons programmes has been eliminated.” In 2001, President Clinton’s Defense Secretary William Cohen told the incoming Bush administration that “Saddam Hussein’s forces are in a state where he cannot pose a threat to his neighbors at this point. We have been successful, through the sanctions regime, to really shut off most of the revenue that will be going to build his—rebuild his military.”

This is why the U.S. found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—repeat zero, nada—when they conquered Iraq in 2003 even though U.S. inspectors scoured the country for months. In other words, Iraq had been telling the truth about weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. had been lying. The U.S. wasn’t just lying before the 2003 war—it had been lying for the whole decade of the 1990s about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. This was no “intelligence failure”—these were deliberate, conscious, carefully crafted LIES!

This should have meant that sanctions were lifted. UN Resolution 687 stated that upon “completion” of its disarmament obligations, sanctions “shall have no further force or effect.” But sanctions were never lifted, even when inspections showed that Iraq had disarmed.

Instead, during those years, members of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) charged with carrying out weapons inspections (37 percent of whom were U.S. personnel) also spied on Iraq—including planting covert, high tech listening devices to monitor Iraqi government and military communications, including Saddam Hussein’s movements. This intelligence was used in a June 1996 attempted coup, and in a December 1998 attempt to assassinate Hussein with cruise missile strikes.

Richard Butler, the head of UNSCOM in 1997-98, talked with President Bill Clinton’s National Security Advisor Sandy Berger on a daily basis. Butler even cleared his reports with the U.S. UNSCOM inspectors when they conducted surprise inspections (violating protocols worked out with Iraq) aimed at provoking confrontations, which were then seized upon by the U.S. to claim Iraq was not complying with inspections. This was part of a constant drumbeat of pre-2001 propaganda that Hussein was cheating on inspections, not upholding his promises, etc., etc., all of which was used to justify war.

Why did the U.S. refuse to acknowledge Iraqi cooperation and disarmament? Why did it refuse to lift sanctions, but instead use arms inspections as a means to attack Hussein’s regime? Because imperialist objectives guided what the U.S. did in Iraq, not international law or UN resolutions. And those imperialist objectives included weakening Iraq as a regional power and overthrowing Saddam Hussein as part of maintaining U.S. regional dominance—not simply stripping Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. maintained sanctions because it hoped to make life so miserable for the population that Iraqis would rise up (preferably via a military coup) and topple the Hussein regime—shoring up U.S.

regional control and demonstrating its power in the process.

This also meant protecting critical cornerstones of U.S.-Middle East predominance—Israel and Egypt. Israel has nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Egypt has chemical weapons. Yet neither country was criticized, sanctioned, or compelled to give up its weapons of mass destruction even though Resolution 687 claimed that disarming Iraq was part of creating a “nuclear-weapons-free zone in the region” and ridding it of all weapons of mass destruction.

“A Legitimized Act of Mass Slaughter”

What was the result of a decade of sanctions following the horrific U.S. bombing of 1991?

I visited Iraq shortly after the 1991 war was over to report for *Revolution* and make the documentary short film, *Iraq—War Against the People*. Dr. Ameer Hamid, director of Iraq’s Red Crescent Society, told me in June 1991, “Since the war, Iraqi children have been exposed to biological warfare, massive biological warfare. When you destroy the infrastructure of a country, sewage with all its germs will flow into the streets; you stop pure water from reaching the children; you give them malnutrition; you prevent medicines from reaching the country. So it’s an excellent environment for death and disease.”

A 1999 survey by UNICEF and Iraq’s Ministry of Health found that the rate of infant mortality among children under five living in south and central Iraq (where 85 percent of the population lives) had risen from 56 per 1,000 live births in 1984-1989 to 131 between 1994-1999—and was continuing to rise over time. UNICEF’s estimate of the staggering death toll: 500,000 or more.

Thus, Iraqi children under five were dying at more than twice the rate they were before the 1991 Gulf War. That’s roughly 5,000 Iraqi children under five dying each month thanks to U.S. actions: a World Trade Center catastrophe and more every 30 days.

Fairfield University Professor Joy Gordon summed up that U.S. policymakers had turned UN sanctions into “a legitimized act of mass slaughter.” In 2002, the Iraqi government stated that 1.7 million children had died from disease or malnutrition since the imposition of sanctions in August 1990.

In 1996, U.S. Ambassador to the UN and soon-to-be Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made it clear that U.S. officials were well aware of the toll in Iraqi lives U.S. actions had taken, and they had no real qualms about it. During a CBS *60 Minutes* interview, host Leslie Stahl asked her about the impact of sanctions: “We have heard that half a million Iraqi children have died. I mean, that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And—and you know, is the price worth it?” Albright’s answer: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.”

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