

Washington Post Neocons Seek US-Patrolled 'Safe Zone' in Syria

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Global Research, May 26, 2014

[Consortiumnews](#) 25 May 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Aug. 30, 2013, claims to have proof that the Syrian government was responsible for a chemical weapons attack on Aug. 21, but that evidence failed to materialize or was later discredited. [State Department photo]

Neocons never blush at their own hypocrisies, demanding Russia respect international law and do nothing to protect eastern Ukrainians, while demanding President Obama ignore international law and create a rebel "safe zone" in Syria.

The Washington Post's neocon editors have made another strident appeal for President Barack Obama to "abandon his passivity and do something to help" the rebels in Syria, complaining that they "continue to receive far too little help from the United States."

The Post ups the ante by boldly asserting that "Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad ... continues to launch chemical attacks ... in rebel-controlled neighborhoods." Yet, even premier Bashar-basher John Kerry has been more discreet in inching that dubious claim into the public arena.

In effect, the Post's editors on Saturday called on the Obama administration to undertake a "responsibility to protect" – or R2P – mission by violating the sovereignty of Syria, i.e., by breaking international law through military action inside Syria's borders to establish and patrol a "safe zone" for the rebels.

Yet, that is exactly the opposite position that the Post took Sunday regarding Ukraine, where the Post [condemned](#) Russia for doing anything to deter the coup regime in Kiev from imposing its will on ethnic Russians in Ukraine's east.

As far as we know, all Russia has done to shield eastern Ukrainians from Kiev's recent attacks is to position troops on Russian territory near the Ukrainian border as a deterrent, although some if not most of those troops have now been withdrawn.

Still, the Post called for imposing new sanctions on Russia for not stopping the eastern Ukrainians from rejecting Sunday's elections to fill the seat of Ukraine's coup-deposed President Viktor Yanukovich.

It's not enough apparently that Russian President Vladimir Putin has spoken in conciliatory terms about the election, saying he hopes to work with whoever emerges as Ukraine's new president. (That appears to be billionaire Petro Poroshenko, regarded as a pro-European pragmatist, who is reported to have won in a landslide.)

Still, the Post demanded more from Putin, insisting that President Obama enforce what even the Post acknowledged was the administration's "expansive definition of what it meant by 'disruption' [of the election], saying it would judge not just whether Moscow's agents tried to stop voting, but whether the government of Vladimir Putin tried to prevent such interference."

In other words, the Post's editors assert that the absence of evidence of actual "Russian meddling" in eastern Ukraine is not evidence of absence, as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld might have said. The Post simply repeats the unsubstantiated claim from "Ukrainian government officials and Western diplomats in Kiev that Russia is backing the separatists."

But the State Department's effort to "prove" that Moscow has organized and directed the resistance in eastern Ukraine against the coup regime in Kiev led to a major propaganda embarrassment, the revelation that U.S.-peddled photographic "proof" of the Russian presence was a hoax, albeit after the photos had circulated widely in the mainstream U.S. news media. .[See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Retracts Russian-Photo Scoop](#)."]

Double Standards

So, let's see if we have this straight: If the Russians don't somehow stop the eastern Ukrainians from resisting the imposition of what they see as an illegitimate regime in Kiev, that qualifies as "Russia's meddling," deserving of punishing sanctions. Yet, the Post condemns Obama for not sending surface-to-air missiles to Syrian rebels to shoot down government aircraft and for not creating a U.S.-defended "safe zone" inside Syrian territory.

The Post's editors justify their double standards on international law by looking at the world through a decidedly neoconservative lens. Neocon geopolitical desires always trump international law as well as intellectual consistency. A decade ago, the same Post editors rationalized the invasion of Iraq based on phony claims about WMD.

Now, the new furor over Syria stems from still-unconfirmed reports that Syrian government forces have included chlorine in bombs dropped on rebel areas. Rebels claim that some casualties have resulted though no deaths have yet been shown to have come from the release of chlorine gas, which was not included in the list of chemical weapons that the Syrian government agreed to surrender last year.

Despite the new allegations and the resulting uproar, a key point about chlorine is that it is a largely ineffective chemical weapon. As chemical weapons specialist De Bretton Gordon [told](#) Reuters, "Chlorine has a host of commercial uses. Actually, it's not very toxic. Sarin is probably 2,000 to 3,000 times more toxic. You and I can buy chlorine in a shop."

But ineffective or not, lethal or not, real or not, the Post says these chlorine allegations mean that it's time for the United States to go beyond providing light weapons and non-lethal supplies to the rebels and start shipping in sophisticated weapons, which Obama has so far rejected because of fears they could fall into the hands of al-Qaeda-connected terrorists inside Syria, who are considered the most effective rebel fighters.

The chlorine gas allegations also have revived neocon hopes about dragging Obama into a U.S. bombing campaign like the one planned but called off last summer. The Post's editorial [blamed](#) Syria's "hell on earth" on the fact that Obama "has resisted advice from

inside and outside his administration to act.”

One Post idea is for U.S. forces “to help patrol a safe zone for them [the rebels] to evade Mr. Assad’s depredations.”

Besides being a violation of international law, this scheme has the camel’s-nose-under-the-tent feel of the U.S.-led intervention in Libya in 2011. That “R2P” operation quickly mission-creeped into a “regime change” that deposed Muammar Gaddafi and splintered Libya into a failed state now dominated by rival militias, including Islamic extremists like the ones who killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2012.

In Syria, the rebels, including the Islamic jihadists arriving from around the Middle East, have received substantial military and financial support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, as well as light arms from the CIA. But that has not been enough to achieve “regime change” in Damascus. So, the neocons are insistent that the U.S. government must weigh in to tip the scales in the rebels’ favor.

The Israeli Factor

But why should Washington care so much about sponsoring another “regime change” in the Middle East, especially given the disastrous results in Iraq and Libya? It is rather simple: Because Israel cares about preventing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from prevailing.

Indeed, I define a neocon as one who has difficulty distinguishing between the national interests of Israel, on the one hand, and those of the United States, on the other. At this point, one would have to be blind not to see that the State Department continues to be dominated by neocon thinking.

Who profits from the turmoil in Syria and, specifically, the prospect of deeper U.S. involvement? Obviously, the various groups trying to overthrow Assad have a strong incentive to draw in the U.S. So, do the Saudis who are seeing their major investment in ousting Assad fall apart. And Assad is an ally of their regional enemy, Iran.

Over the past year or so, it also has become clear that the Netanyahu government in Israel continues to have a powerful incentive to get Washington more deeply engaged in yet another war in the area. This Israeli priority, also driven by Israel’s view of Iran as its primary enemy, has been manifested in many ways.

A report on Sept. 6, 2013, by the New York Times’ Judi Rudoren, writing from Jerusalem, addressed Israel’s thinking in an uncommonly candid way. Her article, titled “Israel Backs Limited Strike Against Syria,” noted that the Israelis have argued, quietly, that the best outcome for Syria’s civil war, at least for the moment, is no outcome. Rudoren wrote:

“For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad’s government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis.

“‘This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don’t want one to win — we’ll settle for a tie,’ said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. ‘Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that’s the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there’s no real threat from Syria.’”

Later in September, then-Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren told the Jerusalem Post that if Israel did have to pick a winner, it would prefer the jihadis over Assad. "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," he explained.

Oren, who is considered very close to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, added that Israel favors the more moderate elements among the Syrian rebels, but still wanted Assad's ouster even if it would result in radical Sunni Islamists coming to power in Damascus.

"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," Oren said, adding that this was the case even if the other "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

If this is actually the way Israel's leaders look at the unconscionable carnage in Syria, they seem to believe that deeper U.S. involvement, including military action, is likely to ensure that there is no early resolution of the conflict or at least that Assad will not be able to bring the country back under his control.

More broadly, Israeli leaders seem to believe that the longer Sunni and Shia are at each other's throats in Syria and across the region, the safer Israel calculates that it is. Thus, it is key not to let Assad win. And military involvement by the U.S. would be welcomed by Israel as increasing the chances that the jihadis also would not win.

The fact that Syria's main ally is Iran, with whom it has a mutual defense treaty, also plays a role in Israeli (and Saudi) calculations. If another "regime change" can be implemented in Syria, it would be a strategic blow against Iran.

The Chlorine Issue

That the Assad government over recent months has been putting increasing pressure on the rebels and consolidating its gains requires the U.S. to step in, in the view of the Israelis and our homebred neocons. The Post's editors don't even ask you to read between the lines.

"Let's get real," they warn. "Without U.S. involvement, the worst-case predictions are coming true."

The Post's impassioned *cri de coeur* is a throwback to the situation in Syria last summer when a number of successes against the rebels showed that Assad might be turning the tide. The prospect of failure in the cause of "regime change" was getting very "real."

So, the neocon-dominated Post and John Kerry's neocon-leaning State Department set out to change that reality, seizing on the murky case of who released Sarin in a suburb of Damascus on Aug. 21, apparently killing hundreds.

On Aug. 30, in a speech pressing for war, Kerry declared, 35 times, that "we know" that the chemical attack was launched by the Syrian government. But the "evidence" that he provided at the time boiled down to "trust us."

Despite media and political pressure to attack, Obama was hesitant to authorize an aerial bombardment without congressional approval. That gave time for Russian President Putin to come up with a compromise plan for Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal, even as Assad continued to blame the rebels for the Aug. 21 incident.

The quieting of the war drums infuriated the neocons – and their fury has flared up periodically since then, even as the case against Assad as the guilty party in the Sarin attack crumbled.

The evidence piling up over the past several months has included two impressive investigative reports by Pulitzer Prize-winner journalist Seymour Hersh describing doubts within the U.S. intelligence community about Syria's guilt and citing sources pointing the finger at Turkey and the rebels. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?](#)"]

Whatever the ultimate explanation of who launched the Sarin attack, it is clear that Kerry was not telling the truth about his knowns and unknowns, to borrow another expression from Don Rumsfeld.

We now know that the reliability of Kerry's information on Syria was on a par with the claims about Iraq's WMD from one of his predecessors, Colin Powell. And, thanks to Hersh's investigative reporting, we also know that the U.S. military attack that was being planned would have been "shock-and-awe – part two," a far cry from what Kerry had said at the time, that it would be an "unbelievably small, limited" war.

More Drums of War

Now, the war drums are banging again over Syria's alleged use of chlorine in some of its bombs, with the Washington Post taking its usual spot in the percussion section. Still, there has been a struggle pulling together a full orchestra to perform this new propaganda concerto.

On April 13, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power told ABC's "This Week" that Washington was looking into reports that chlorine gas was used in the Syrian village of Kafr Zeita, 125 miles north of Damascus. She added, though, that the reports were thus far "unsubstantiated."

Adding to the new furor, the anti-Assad advocacy group Human Rights Watch released a report that said that evidence it has reviewed "strongly suggests" that regime helicopters dropped improvised explosives known as barrel bombs loaded with chlorine gas cylinders on three towns in northern Syria in mid-April. The report noted that only the Syrian government operates helicopters.

On May 13, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told a news conference in Washington: "We have at least 14 signs that show us that, in the past recent weeks again, chemical weapons in a smaller scale have been used, in particular chlorine," Fabius said. "Right now we are examining the samples that were taken."

It should be noted here that – for the past year or so – France has been carrying water for Saudi Arabia, which was kind enough to buy a lot of expensive French warplanes and to bail out some failing French companies. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Why France Sank an Iran Nuke Deal.](#)"]

French diplomats normally are careful not to show their full hand. But Fabius let slip more than he probably intended, when he complained about how much he regretted that Obama canceled the strikes on Syria last summer. "It would have changed a lot of things," [said](#) Fabius. "But what is done is done, and we're not going to rewrite history."

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki declined to comment on Fabius's allegations on the use of chlorine by Assad's forces. She said Fabius and Kerry had discussed "the importance of removing the remaining declared chemical weapons, but they did not discuss the specifics of what the foreign minister announced from his press conference."

On May 14 in Saudi Arabia, a reporter asked Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to comment on what Fabius had said the day before in Washington about the Syrian government using chlorine in a series of attacks: "Can you tell us what the American government thinks is happening and whether those are regime tactics? And what does it mean in terms of the agreement to move Syria's chemical arsenal?"

Hagel answered: "I'm aware of the French foreign minister's statement. We've not seen any evidence of the specifics of that statement. I know the OPCW [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] is investigating it. ... So far have been pretty successful in getting more than 90 percent of the chemical weapons and the precursors out of Syria."

At a May 15 [press conference](#) in London, Secretary of State Kerry was asked to explain why Hagel said the U.S. had seen no evidence to support Fabius's allegations. Kerry handled the question with his customary aplomb:

"On the issue of evidence, I suspect - I haven't talked with Secretary Hagel about what was in his mind or what he was referring to with respect to that. ... And I have seen evidence, I don't know how verified it is - it's not verified yet - it's hasn't been confirmed, but I've seen the raw data that suggests there may have been, as France has suggested, a number of instances in which chlorine has been used in the conduct of war."

Apparently, having brought the world to the brink of war over Syria last summer, Kerry, the French, Human Rights Watch and the Western mainstream media are not about to cease and desist now.

We will be well advised to keep this recent history in mind as Kerry, the Post editors and others comment on Ukraine in the coming days. *Caveat lector.*

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