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Obama's speech: No end to war threat against Syria

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In his nationally televised speech Tuesday night, President Obama made an awkward and embarrassing tactical retreat on his announced plans to carry out military strikes against Syria. It would be a grave mistake, however, to believe that the president's speech signaled a fundamental shift in US policy. It at most represents a postponement. War will come, and it will be all the more ferocious and dangerous for the delay.

The two operative passages in Obama's remarks consisted of the announcement that he had asked Congress to put off any vote authorizing the use of military force and the statement that he had "ordered our military to maintain their current posture to keep the pressure on [Syrian President Bashar al] Assad, and to be in position if diplomacy fails." In other words, an attack will come sooner rather than later, and when it does there won't be any pretense of seeking congressional approval.

The administration had meant for this speech to be an announcement of the decision to proceed with the imminent bombing of Syria. Much of the president's rhetoric consisted of unsubstantiated claims and mutually conflicting arguments for doing just that. But it ended with the declaration of a postponement and the vow that Washington would pursue a "diplomatic path."

What happened? US plans were well advanced and the moment for launching them had arrived. Obama had decreed his “red line” in Syria, and all it took was an incident or a provocation to provide the pretext for implementing his threat. This was forthcoming on August 21 in a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus that was, in all likelihood, staged by the so-called “rebels” in collusion with US and Saudi intelligence to provide the *casus belli* sought by Washington.

Military intervention in pursuit of regime-change in Syria had become all the more urgent because of the string of defeats suffered by the Al Qaeda-led “rebels” since June and growing indications that their CIA-backed insurgency was in a state of advanced disintegration.

The media went into overdrive in churning out war propaganda, the administration made unfounded claims of broad international support—if not UN sanction—and preparations were made to send volleys of cruise missiles into Damascus within days.

But then a major spanner was thrown into the works: the unanticipated virulent hostility to war of the broad masses of the American people and populations all over the world. This opposition was all the more remarkable in that it increased in the teeth of a barrage of propaganda and lies by the US political establishment and the media, which were screaming for war.

The mass popular opposition found its first reflection in the British House of Commons vote against a resolution supporting military action, resulting in US imperialism’s principal ally ruling out participation in the planned attack. Given its international isolation, the Obama administration concluded it needed a vote in Congress, which it previously had no intention of seeking, to provide a fig leaf of legality and a false veneer of popular support.

All appeared to be in order. Both the Democratic and Republican leaderships in the House and Senate lined up behind war and promised to seek an Authorization for the Use of Military Force.

But the popular hostility to another war of aggression in the Middle East again made itself felt in a way that members of Congress could not easily ignore. Growing numbers of constituents contacted their congressmen and senators about the impending attack, with nine out of ten declaring their angry opposition to the war plans.

It became increasingly apparent that Congress would not vote in favor of the resolution under these conditions, and Obama was facing the prospect of being defeated not only in the Republican-led House, but in the Democratic-led Senate as well.

Sections of the political establishment began to tack in the face of the broad antiwar sentiment. This ranged from right-wing Republicans, who had previously criticized Obama for failing to intervene earlier, to pseudo-left outfits like the International Socialist Organization, which had

taken the lead in campaigning for war and portraying the CIA- and Saudi-backed Islamist militias as the “Syrian revolution.”

Then, Secretary of State John Kerry, in deep crisis and evident confusion after spending the previous week as the administration’s point man in reciting lies to justify an imperialist war—with next to nothing to show for it in terms of international support—stumbled over a question at a London press conference as to whether anything could forestall an American attack.

His answer, that Syria’s government could surrender all of its chemical weapons, was swiftly taken up by Russia and then Syria itself, which said it was willing to carry out the disarmament and sign the chemical weapons treaty.

The first response of the State Department and the White House was to try to walk back Kerry’s remark, which was publicly described as “rhetorical” and “hypothetical,” and characterized by administration officials speaking off the record as “off-script” and a “goof.”

However, this response made it all too apparent that—after arguing for two weeks that the aim of the impending US aggression was to deter the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons—Washington could not take “yes” for an answer.

It only underscored the fact that chemical weapons were never anything more than a pretext for military intervention. Washington’s aims in Syria, as in Afghanistan and Iraq before it, were of a geopolitical character. US imperialism seeks to topple the Assad government and impose a more pliant regime in order to assert its hegemony over the oil-rich region and deal a strategic defeat to Iran and Russia, regional rivals that are also in Washington’s crosshairs.

The administration decided it could not simply ignore the Russian-Syrian offer without exposing its real war aims and incurring even greater popular opposition. For now, it will engage in diplomatic maneuvers at the UN—with the aim of preparing a war. Doubtless, it will draw from the Bush WMD playbook, issuing unrealizable ultimatums to the Syrian regime that will then be used as justification for an attack.

For Obama, this represents a major political setback. Living in a bubble of synthetic public opinion dished out by multimillionaire news announcers and media pundits, he found himself confronted with real public opinion, which he had disastrously misread. This is not surprising. Obama has shown no real vocation as a politician. His training and worldview are those of an intelligence operative, someone who relies on secret dossiers rather than any insight into the mood of the American people.

The Obama administration has not given up on war. The profound contradictions of American capitalism that give rise to militarism and aggression have not gone away. Washington will now

redouble its efforts to prepare a military attack. Another chemical weapons provocation in Syria is not only possible, but likely.

This doubling down on a war in Syria poses even more catastrophic consequences, as Iran and Russia have now had ample opportunity to evaluate Washington's true aims and prepare accordingly.

Moreover, the decision to launch an illegal war of aggression opposed by the overwhelming majority of the American people can only go forward hand in hand with intensified political repression.

The fight against war in Syria and beyond retains all of its burning urgency. It can be waged only by mobilizing working people, students and youth in a struggle, independent of the Congress and the two big-business parties, that is directed against capitalism, the source of militarism, social inequality and the assault on democratic rights.