

On the Perils of Imperialism

– Hisham H. Ahmed

IT IS QUITE obvious that president Barack Obama's policy toward Syria is troubled at best. The President seems to have committed himself to postures which he does not seem able to effectively meet. The "red line" he had designated for attacking Syria if chemical weapons were used seems to have imposed more of a burden on Obama himself than on Bashar Al-Assad. Obama's policy seemed to be more confused and confusing than ever for the American public.

The climax of this confusion came out in Obama's September 10 address, originally meant to mobilize Congress in support of an authorization for using military force against Syria, but inevitably turned into a "life-saving" speech for Obama avoiding embarrassment and political defeat.

The President, reflecting his own indecisiveness, first threw the crisis in the lap of Congress by asking their vote of support for a military strike, then asked Congress in his speech to postpone the vote – knowing quite well that he would not get the desired support from the representatives of the American people, including from within his own party.

In this contradictory and not so impressive speech, Obama deepened the state of public confusion. On one hand, he said that launching a "targeted military strike" against the Syrian regime would be motivated by his determination to protect the national security of the United States. On the other hand, he pointed out that the Syrian regime does not possess the capability to pose a credible threat to the United States.

In fact, this is in part why a strike on Syria is fraught with many dangers, risks and in fact threats to American interests. First, such an attack does not enjoy the support of the U.S. public, according to many opinion polls and surveys, and no wonder. For most people, the ghosts of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the deceptions involved particularly in the case of Iraq, still live – wars that have brought more economic, human and political problems than the promised security.

In addition, people are understandably fearful that despite all assurances to the contrary, nobody can guarantee that an attack on Syria would not take the United States onto a slippery path of uncertainty and perhaps calamity. For the ordinary American who bore the brunt of a worsening economy while witnessing spending on warfare consume some \$4 trillion, addressing underlying domestic problems like education, health care and unemployment is more of a priority.

Secondly, the contemplated strike did not enjoy the support of Congress. Perhaps it is unusual for a crisis to so greatly cross normal partisan lines: Some of Obama's ardent supporters of a strike are Republican, like John McCain, while some of the most ardent opponents are Republican as well. The same could be said about members of Obama's own party.

Third, even some of the most loyal U.S. allies, like Britain, do not support the idea of a military strike as the vote in the British House of Commons, repudiating Prime Minister Cameron, showed. Only the French president stated that France would participate in military action.

Finally, international public opinion as well as the UN Security Council were clearly not in support of military strikes on Syria.

Obama's Isolation

All this is to say that by acting without domestic, Congressional, allied and international support, the Obama administration could only underscore U.S. isolation and global resentment on the one hand, and on the other hand, deal a serious blow to the importance of international law and consensus on matters of great sensitivity.

Among other things, this carries the danger of inviting other great powers to follow the U.S. lead, i.e. to act outside the limits of international legitimacy, when it serves their own state or regime interests.

There are other serious dangers inherent in a unilateral strike on Syria under the rubric of punishing the Syrian regime for allegedly using chemical weapons. While the brutal and vicious Syrian regime is not defensible in any way, and while the atrocities it has committed since its assumption of power over 40 years are too many to enumerate, it is hardly certain that it is the only side to have used chemical weapons in this war. Prior to the August 21 attack, there were suggestions published by credible media outlets that some Al-Qaeda affiliated group, sponsored by some regional powers, may have used such weapons.

One cannot lose sight of the fact that an American attack on Syria would cause more deaths and waves of refugees, and wreak more havoc on a country ravaged by war for more than two years. Also to be expected is that anti-American sentiments will be on the rise. This is to suggest that the greatest beneficiary of an American military strike on Syria would not be the United States but rather its enemy Al-Qaeda, which thrives only in an environment characterized by a weak and/or failed state.

President Obama seems to have lost a golden opportunity to appear as a statesman and a world leader who leads rather than confuses. The President should have followed in the footsteps of David Cameron of Britain, and said that he gets the message that his country does not want to go the military path. The diplomatic overtures by the Russians to neutralize Syrian chemical weapons under international supervision could defuse one of the world's most complicated crises.

Applying the same human rights yard-stick and standard to other countries in the Middle East, like Egypt and Bahrain, would revive Obama's image in the eyes of the peoples of the region. Instead, Obama's indecisiveness contributed to further boxing himself and the country in the corner, given the Russians' evident more masterful strategic role in the regional chess board.

To be sure, no one can claim that there are easy solutions to the Syrian crisis. Given the fact that all the parties involved are heavily entrenched behind their respective positions, with no internal military or political settlement in reach, the solution to the crisis cannot be but international in nature. President Obama could have risen to unmatched international preeminence had he seized the moment.

Instead, the U.S.-Russian agreement on Syrian chemical weapons seems to be more Russian-oriented than otherwise. However, the first requirement for any enduring solution is for external powers to stop making the Syrian crisis a proxy war. A stringent serious arms embargo will have to be imposed on all participants. With some degree of stability in Syria, chemical weapons can be placed under international supervision, as part and parcel of making the entire Middle East a nuclear, chemical and biological warfare-free zone.

Also with international supervision, in the form of peacekeeping forces, credible democratic elections can be held where the Syrian people can choose their own representatives. But only an international community, armed by the will to trouble-shoot the crisis and not to boost its arms sale opportunities, can bring about this solution.

In the end, a formula of this type, even if with some variations, will have to be introduced. The lives of more innocent civilian Syrians merit that such a solution be entertained now, not after the country endures more destruction and devastation. The prolongation of the crisis until all parties wear each other out, as conventional wisdom would have it, only provides a more dangerous recipe for more despair and its consequences.

November/December 2013, ATC 167