

Syria: Public Opinion Prevented a War for Now. We Must Change the Underlying Violent U.S. Foreign Policy.

by Glen Anderson

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Use honest words:

In response to allegations that Syria's president Bashar Assad had used chemical weapons, everybody was clamoring that someone must "do something." In the U.S., "do something" was assumed to mean "do something" **violent!** Diplomacy was essentially "off the table."

Likewise, most politicians and news media referred to the U.S.'s possible "use of force," but that is a deceptive euphemism for "military violence" and "killing people." I think of "using force" when I vigorously squeeze and twist the stuck lid on a pickle jar. But military attacks, bombs, and cruise missiles are actual violence and deliberate killing, not merely "force."

So if we want to understand Syria and U.S. foreign policy overall, we must first start to become honest about the ongoing assumption that U.S. violence is acceptable.

At first, war was the only option. Then the "impossible" peace solution became obvious:

In 2002-2003 George W. Bush claimed that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction" but did not accept the United Nations' inspectors' reports that the WMD program had ended. In the summer of 2013 this pattern repeated itself with President Obama wanting to attack Syria without waiting for UN inspectors' report, and despite evidence that seriously conflicted with Obama's unproven allegations.

In the fall of 2002, George W. Bush was planning to attack Iraq without getting approval from Congress, but the people made him slow down and consult Congress. In the summer of 2013, President Obama wanted to attack Syria without getting approval from Congress, but people slowed him down and made him consult Congress.

On December 20, 2007, when Obama was campaigning for President, he told interviewer Charlie Savage, "The President does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation." But in 2013 he was planning to do that very thing against Syria without Congressional authorization.

Conflicting information about who really used the chemical weapon in Syria refuted the Obama Administration's claimed certainty. Indeed, the Obama Administration actually tried to get the United Nations to call off its investigation into the matter. The August 27 article at www.ipsnews.net/2013/08/in-rush-to-strike-syria-u-s-tried-to-derail-u-n-probe reported that the Administration's reversal "came within hours of the deal reached between Syria and the U.N." But despite Secretary of State John Kerry's direct personal pressure on U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to stop the U.N.'s investigation, the U.N. proceeded to investigate.

Obama was planning a violent military attack on Syria, and this was becoming absolutely inevitable. Finally, a reporter in London asked Secretary of State John Kerry whether there was anything President Assad could do to stop U.S. strikes, and Kerry replied offhandedly, "Sure, he could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week . . . without delay and allow the full and total accounting for that, but he isn't about to do it and it can't be done, obviously." Kerry was saying this in a dismissive way as if this were impossible. But Syria and Russia immediately said, in effect, "Sure, we can do that!"

This episode shows that the Obama Administration had not seriously pursued diplomatic solutions but had immediately jumped onto war as the first resort, not the last resort, contrary to its public statements. During both terms of his administration, Obama has surrounded himself with hawks and has grossly failed to seek information and insights from doves, just like he has filled his positions of economic advisors with people from Wall Street, Goldman-Sachs, and big banks, instead of people who would critique those elites and understand ordinary Americans' economic realities.

Mainstream media likewise were blind-sided by the reality that diplomacy was possible instead of war. It's a good thing the peace movement saved the U.S. from blundering into another boneheaded war that would only have escalated world tensions, antagonized world opinion, and provoked more terrorist "blowback" upon the U.S. and our allies. But you can search the official statements of politicians and mainstream news media without seeing them ever thank the peace movement for saving our nation and the world from this disaster.

The peace movement and alternative progressive media have recognized the realities. For example, see the September 11, 2013, article posted at www.inthesetimes.com, titled "How the Anti-War Movement Won the Hearts and Minds of the Public" at http://inthesetimes.com/article/15592/how_the_anti_war_movement_won_the_hearts_and_minds_of_the_public/

The peace movement is larger than people thought, and we won:

While the peace movement typically sees itself as small, we are actually much larger than politicians or media or the movement itself recognizes. President Obama was hell-bent for war and saw no alternative, but a huge number of Americans – and millions of people around the world and their governments – told Obama and the U.S. Congress that we refused to have yet another war. The U.S. attack on Syria that just a few weeks ago was assumed to be inevitable suddenly was prevented.

Offices of the U.S. Senate and House were flooded with people opposing war, and we gave an earful to every Congress member who was home in August and early September. Senator Patty Murray's staff reported receiving 30,000 phone calls and e-mails, with 93% saying NO to war. Senator Maria Cantwell finally said she wanted diplomacy instead of war. Eastern Washington's conservative Republican House member Cathy McMorris Rodgers finally said she did not see how military action would be "in our national interest" nor how it "fits into a larger plan to resolve the conflict and stabilize the situation in the Middle East." None of these were their initial positions. Public pressure forced Congress to choose diplomacy instead of war.

U.S. Representative Jim McDermott from Seattle has long been a strong dove, and he held a Town Hall Meeting in Seattle to slow down the rush to war, and to let his constituents speak. Four hundred constituents attended, Todd Boyle videotaped it, and you can watch it at www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5PF3Abde34

In late August 2013, an NBC poll showed most Americans opposed another war in Syria, and 80% opposed a war without Congressional authorization. Also, in late August, at least 188 members of Congress have called for a debate and vote on the war question, and the British Parliament, which is similar to our Congress, voted against Prime Minister David Cameron's support for Obama's new war. Also pulling the plug were the U.N.'s Security Council, NATO, the Arab League, Jordan, and Egypt. Obama was left with practically no support except for France (which has a lot of baggage regarding Syria) and Israel.

Russia's president Vladimir Putin actually described the situation accurately:

While Russia's president Vladimir Putin is wrong about many things, he has been widely recognized as very accurate in describing the U.S.'s wrong-headed approach to Syria. Russia is an ally of Syria, so it might be natural to take his September 12, 2013, Op-Ed in the New York *Times* "with a grain of salt," but his article is surprisingly accurate.

For example, he correctly specifies that, "Under current international law, force is permitted only in self-defense or by the decision of the Security Council," and that "Anything else is unacceptable under the United Nations Charter and would constitute an act of aggression." He also criticized the notion of "American exceptionalism," the mistaken notion that the U.S. is so special that we are entitled to do whatever we want, regardless of the international laws that bind other countries. See <http://goo.gl/vHaqtO> or <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>

He warned that a U.S. military strike would likely kill many innocent victims, spread the conflict "far beyond Syria's borders," "unleash a new wave of terrorism," and "could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and further destabilize the Middle East and North Africa. It could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance."

Unlike the simplistic assumptions asserted by many U.S. politicians, Putin wrote, "Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multireligious country. There are few champions of democracy in Syria. But there are more than enough Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes battling the government."

He also wrote, "It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States. Is it in America's long-term interest? I doubt it. Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan 'you're either with us or against us.'"

Use diplomacy, not military violence:

Some of the "rebels" that the U.S. is arming in Syria are very closely tied to extreme terrorist groups. The CIA and U.S. military have a terrible track record of funding violent groups that have turned against us, both in the war underway at that time and in new wars that arise in subsequent years. We need to debunk the myth that military violence is the solution and recognize that **militarism is the problem!**

The Obama Administration's confusion about what its proposed attack would actually seek to accomplish – and the peace movement's vigorous opposition – weakened Congress's support for war. Putin's surprisingly wise and accurate critique attracted respect from many unexpected persons, including some in high places. The London reporter's plea for an alternative to war combined with all of these factors to sink the proposal for attacking Syria. The attack would have been a train wreck, but we derailed it before it could do more significant damage.

The limited U.S. military attack on Syria would certainly **not** have caused Syria to get rid of all of its chemical weapons. But diplomacy quickly reached an agreement that military violence would have been powerless to achieve.

On September 10, 2013, Phyllis Bennis (from the Institute for Policy Studies) and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., offered a “Joint Statement on the Syrian Crisis” (www.ips-dc.org/articles/joint_statement_jackson_bennis_syria), which called for diplomacy instead of military violence. They called for diplomacy that would “bring together all sides in Syria’s war, and all those arming and funding them. Russia and the U.S., along with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and beyond, must all be at the table with all their Syrian partners – and we must push, urge, demand an immediate ceasefire and an immediate arms embargo on all sides.”

They urged everyone to strengthen the Convention Against Chemical Weapons and to support efforts by the U.N. to investigate their use in Syria. They opposed “all chemical weapons in Syria” and urged pushing ahead for a “zone in the Middle East free of all weapons of mass destruction,” which several nations including the U.S. had urged twenty years ago. (Note: This would include Israel, even though the U.S. has continually provided diplomatic cover for Israel’s chemical and nuclear weapons.) Jackson is the Founder and President of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. Bennis is Director of New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, www.ips-dc.org

How did Obama get himself into this mess?

Perhaps President Obama took a lesson from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who had provocatively drawn “a red line” on possible nuclear weapons in Iran. When Obama recklessly drew “a red line” on chemical weapons in Syria, he boxed himself in and made him vulnerable to being tricked by “false flag” operations in which somebody commits the act but attributes it to someone else. In the case of Syria’s civil war, much evidence shows that any of the various rebel groups likely used chemical weapons knowing that Obama would assume that President Assad was responsible, thereby tricking the U.S. into joining the rebels’ civil war against Syria’s government.

Having heard Obama’s “red line” threat – and knowing that U.N. inspectors were already in Syria -- Assad would have nothing to gain and much to lose from using chemical weapons. Indeed, several factions of rebel groups have claimed responsibility, including one Sunni faction that confessed to mis-handling chemical weapons they had received from the U.S.’s Sunni ally, Saudi Arabia.

Obama is a chronic deal-maker who thinks he can control domestic politics by cutting and shaving political differences at home. However, this deal-making ends up squeezing him into tight political corners without good options left. Obama also seems to have a naïve belief that drones, missiles, and other airborne weapons can be more precisely targeted than they really can. U.S. air attacks keep causing many, many civilian casualties, but Obama’s military advisors keep telling him that they are precise, so he keeps thinking he can achieve limited, specific results, when all he does is escalate conflicts, kill innocent people, and provoke what the CIA has long called “blowback.”

Is Iran the real target?

On August 30, 2013, Robert Fisk, a very seasoned Middle Eastern reporter, published an article titled, “Iran, Not Syria, Is the West’s Real Target.” He notes that because Iran is an ally of Syria, the U.S. wants to attack Syria as a way of weakening Iran and helping Israel, which – along with the U.S., – has a long-standing animosity toward Iran.

Fisk does criticize Assad’s regime in Syria, but he also reminds us that when Saddam Hussein – a U.S. ally in 1988 – gassed the Kurds then at Hallabjah, the CIA promoted the lie that Iran had gassed them. Many more people died in the U.S.-supported gassing in 1988 than in Syria during August. Also, the U.S.’s ally Saddam Hussein used gas against the Iranian army during their war from 1980 to 1988. The U.S. also has remained silent when Israel’s military used chemical weapons several times in recent decades. Clearly, the U.S.’s position about chemical weapons is based on politics rather than on principle.

What about the U.S.’s chemical weapons?

Do you know the old saying about “the pot calling the kettle black”? Why have U.S. politicians and mainstream news media almost entirely refused to point out that the U.S. and Russia have neglected to eliminate their own chemical weapons? Both the U.S. and Russia have signed a legally binding agreement (the Chemical Weapons Convention) with several deadlines over a 15-year stretch to eliminate their own chemical weapons, but we imposed a very short deadline of only about nine months for Syria to get rid of theirs. The U.S. and Russia missed the third and final deadline of 2012. Israel signed the CWC in 1993 but never ratified it.

See more information at <http://goo.gl/Z9GO40>

Let’s take these real steps toward peace:

On September 12, 2013, one thoughtful source urged us to consider how the mass atrocities in Syria could have been prevented, and suggests these things that the world, and specifically the U.S., should have done:

- **First**, President Obama should announce to the world that the US will sign the Arms Trade Treaty when he addresses the UN General Assembly on September 24th.
- **Second**, the US should start a discussion with the members of the UN Security Council about the responsibility not to veto actions related to stopping human rights atrocities.
- **Also**, urge President Obama asking him to sign the Arms Trade Treaty, and urge the Senate to ratify it.
- **Urge** the permanent members of the UN Security Council to agree that they will not use the veto when dealing with mass atrocities. Many dignitaries such as Madeline Albright, Kofi Annan, and Ban Ki Moon support this supported limiting the veto when it comes to the horrific crimes of genocide and the appalling crimes against humanity and war crimes that we have witnessed in Syria . No leader should ever use helicopter gunships, artillery and chemical weapons on unarmed women and children.

The feminist peace organization CodePink (www.codepink.org) urges these specific positive steps now :

- Take a strong role in pushing for a ceasefire and a negotiated solution for Syria during the Geneva II Convention;
- Push for an increase in US aid to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees;
- Adhere to international laws pertaining to the use of cruel weapons, including the US use of killer drones.

When nations are in conflict, a good strategy is to start agreeing on some quick small matters in order to build momentum toward negotiating agreements on larger, more complex matters. These quick small agreements are called “Confidence-Building Measures” (CBMs). The U.S. and Russia quickly reached a diplomatic solution regarding Syria. Let’s build on that quick success with negotiations about further issues.

Iran – an ally of Syria – has a moderate new President who wants to greatly improve relations with the U.S. If the U.S. were smart, we would start talking with Iran about small quick matters to resolve those, and then use these CBMs to further reduce tensions and solve bigger conflicts involving Iran and the U.S.

To dampen Syria’s civil war, the outside nations and entities should stop supplying weapons to rival sides. Most of the rest of the world is upset that the U.S., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, various oil sheikdoms, and other entities are sending weapons into this extremely violent civil war. The rest of the world would support an international agreement to stop arming all sides, including the Syrian government and various rebels and jihadists.

U.S. military intervention has made daily life much worse – and national politics much more violent – in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Let’s help the U.S. government learn the lesson that militarism does not solve problems, but only makes them worse.

The world still needs compassionate and thoughtful efforts to heal itself from centuries of colonialism and a half century of Cold War. The world also needs to learn how to respect differences in race, nationality, religion, culture, and so forth.

The U.S. and other nations need to act from humane principles rather than short-sighted geopolitical manipulations based on greed and power. Those have led the U.S. government to support dictators and extremists, including those who have been funding terrorism and other violence. The U.S.’s cynical geopolitical manipulations and militarism keep provoking “blowback” and new threats to U.S. security, along with making the whole world more dangerous.

We should stop believing the excuses and rationalizations that U.S. military interventions since the 1990s were for “humanitarian” purposes. The hawkish U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. Empire are bi-partisan. U.S. foreign policy includes “neoconservatives” affiliated with the Republican Party and “liberal interventionists” affiliated with the Democratic Party. As long as election campaigns for both political parties are funded by “special interests” (banks, giant corporations that extract natural resources from other nations, weapons manufacturers, etc.), we will continue to make grossly immoral wars that hurt the U.S. along with the rest of the world. If we want peace, we absolutely must change the way we fund election campaigns. We also need to vigorously regulate big business and promote **fair** trade instead of “free trade.”

Interesting, informative resources from early September 2013:

- Read “Rep. Alan Grayson on Syria: U.S. Cannot Be the Policeman for the World” at <http://videocafe.crooksandliars.com/heather/rep-alan-grayson-syria-us-cannot-be-police>
- Read “Was A Rogue Syrian Officer Responsible for Chemical Weapons Attack?” by attorney Jonathan Turley at <http://jonathanturley.org/2013/08/31/was-a-rogue-syrian-officer-responsible-for-chemical-weapons-attack/>
- Read “Undeclaring War on Syria” at www.bradblog.com/?p=10219 This article is about Congress demanding that the President seek Congressional approval before taking action.

- Several persons at FCNL wrote “Ten Syria Questions for Hagel and Kerry” at http://fcnl.org/blog/2c/10_syria_questions_for_kerry_and_hagel/
- Lisa Schirch wrote “Getting Off the Wheel of Misfortune: US Policy and Syrian Suffering” at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-schirch/us-policy-syria_b_3829468.html?utm_hp_ref=fb&src=sp&comm_ref=false#sb=761275b=facebook
- Michael Shank wrote “Prevention Better than Punitive in Syria” at <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/29/prevention-better-than-punitive-in-syria/> and “If American Wants Assad to Respect International Law, It Must Respect It, Too” at <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/09/01/if-america-wants-assad-to-respect-international-law-it-must-respect-it-too/>
- Noam Chomsky was featured for most of the hour on the September 11, 2013, segment of Democracy Now! Watch the video or read the transcript at: www.democracynow.org/2013/9/11/chomsky_instead_of_illegal_threat_to
- A respected local peace supporter recommended this thoughtful article. Instead of merely refraining from bombing, let’s promote a real peace conference: <http://portside.org/2013-08-26/only-peace-conference-not-air-strikes-can-stop-further-bloodshed>
- Zoltan Grossman, an exceptionally well informed professor at The Evergreen State College in Olympia WA, compiled a timeline about the history of bio-chemical weapons. With his permission we are posting it to www.olympiafor.org