

# Syrian war threatens to escalate as Obama-Putin talks fail

By Jordan Shilton  
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A 90-minute meeting between US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hangzhou, China Monday produced no results on an agreement between the two countries over the civil war in Syria.

Reports on the meeting spoke of the tense atmosphere between the two leaders. For his part, Obama absurdly sought to strike a pose of deep concern for the humanitarian situation in Syria and pinned the blame on Moscow and its allies in the Assad government in Damascus for the ongoing violence.

The failure of the previous ceasefire had enabled Assad to bomb “rebel” opposition groups “with impunity,” Obama intoned, creating a “very dangerous dynamic.”

Yesterday, Western media outlets fueled this narrative by widely reporting as fact unconfirmed allegations that the Assad government had launched a chlorine gas attack in Aleppo. The claims were based on a video posted online by the Syrian Civil Defence, a rescue team which operates in areas controlled by government opponents. They alleged that four barrel bombs containing poison gas were dropped, injuring 80.

In the past, the US has repeatedly seized on such allegations to prepare the ground for direct military intervention. On each occasion, the claims have turned out to be fraudulent, including most famously in 2013 when Obama pulled back from an all-out war with the Assad regime.

The allegations came in the wake of significant government advances at the expense of opposition forces around Aleppo. Indicating the potential for a rapid escalation of the conflict, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose government is currently leading an invasion in the north of Syria to clear Kurdish militants and Islamic State forces from the Turkish-Syrian border, responded to the fighting by suggesting that Turkish troops could clear a humanitarian corridor to Aleppo. He reiterated his call for a “safe zone” between the towns of Jarabulus and Azaz, a move which would create a justification for the deployment

of NATO troops, including from the European imperialist powers, to Syria.

According to a Reuters report, Turkish officials are appealing for international support to establish control over an area stretching 40 kilometres into Syria so as to break up two Kurdish-controlled areas to the east and west. An anonymous Turkish official commented that only the initial stages of this plan had been accomplished, before adding ominously, “What will be done now will depend on coordination with coalition powers and the support they will provide.”

The attempt by Obama and the corporate media to cloak US machinations in Syria in human rights propaganda should fool no one. Washington has waged virtually unending war over the past quarter century throughout the Middle East, laying waste to entire societies and claiming the lives of millions in the process. The calls for humanitarian aid and safe zones are transparent pretexts to legitimise a vast intensification of the imperialist intervention in Syria.

Even during the course of the past two weeks, since Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva to discuss Syria, it has been the US and its Turkish allies which have brought about the most significant escalation in violence with an all-out invasion of the north of the country. The Turkish troops and their Sunni Islamist allies made no secret of the fact that they intended to target Kurdish forces and drive them east of the Euphrates River. The US has been backing these same Kurdish forces with arms, funding and training for them to serve as proxies in Washington’s campaign against Islamic State.

The Turkish army reported its first fatalities yesterday, when two soldiers were killed in a rocket attack by ISIS forces. On Sunday, Turkish troops reportedly forced ISIS fighters out of their last stronghold on the Turkish border.

Despite Washington’s backing for Ankara’s open-ended intervention with air power and military “advisers” on the ground, Obama persisted after his meeting with Putin in

casting Russia as the aggressor.

“We have had some productive conversations about what a real cessation of violence would look like to allow us to both focus our energies on common enemies,” Obama told a press conference afterwards. “But given the gaps of trust that exist, that’s a tough negotiation. We haven’t yet closed the gap.”

An unnamed White House official later told the *Washington Post* that Obama had been unwilling to strike a deal with Putin that would not secure the “long-term goals” of the US in Syria.

References to Washington’s “long-term goals” in Syria is code for the implementation of a long-planned regime change operation in Damascus that would replace Assad’s government with a pro-Western puppet regime. This has been the aim of US imperialism ever since it began fomenting the Syrian civil war five years ago by funding and arming Islamist extremist forces, including groups with ties to Al Qaida. Its intervention in Syria is part of a broader regional agenda of securing US dominance over the most important oil-producing region in the world and establishing an unchallengeable position on the Eurasian land mass by weakening its geo-strategic rivals, above all Russia and China.

This reality was summed up in a comment published by Anthony Cordesman, a veteran strategist of US imperialism, on the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank’s web site yesterday. Cordesman blasted the Obama administration’s strategy of seeking a deal with Russia, writing, “Russia has steadily used its military intervention to promote its own interest in Syria and the Middle East, attack the Arab rebels, and support the Assad regime. Russia has also built new ties to Iran, shipped Iran advanced S300 surface-to-air missiles, and managed to reach out Saudi Arabia in spite of this—seriously discussing agreed limits on their petroleum production and exports.”

Cordesman went on to declare that ISIS was not the main problem in Syria or Iraq. After describing the ethnic partition of the country and the conflicts this has produced as if the US was a passive bystander, he noted in a revealing passage that the Obama administration “has never addressed the fact that the real fight for Syria is taking place where ISIS isn’t.”

Cordesman’s comment reflects growing concern among ruling circles about the lack of a US strategy in the region. Substantial sections of the political establishment, including leading Republicans, have rallied behind presidential candidate Hillary Clinton because she has pledged to intensify US military aggression abroad following November’s election.

However, Obama’s overtures to Russia for an agreement

in Syria are in no sense a sign of decreasing tensions and a retreat by the US. The immediate impulse for a new ceasefire is the advances that have been made by government troops around the city of Aleppo. While US-backed rebels made substantial gains in early August, Assad’s forces have pushed back the Islamists with the help of Russian air support. A supply route to the north of Aleppo has been cut off by government soldiers and Assad’s troops also broke through a rebel-controlled corridor to the south of the city.

The US-backed, Turkish-led intervention into northern Syria, which brings troops from NATO countries in to close proximity with Russian forces, has heightened the potential for a clash between NATO allies and Moscow that could quickly spiral out of control into a broader war. Even if a deal is reached, it will not end the pursuit by Russia and the United States of opposed strategies in Syria that pose an ever increasing risk of direct military conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

This is made all the more probable given the deep contradictions in Washington’s Syria policy. It has leant its full backing to the Turkish incursion, which is explicitly seeking to establish a zone free of Kurdish control in northern Syria to prevent the emergence of a unified area of Kurdish control, while at the same time it continues to support the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG)—the forces now coming under Turkish bombardment.

Obama also had a bilateral meeting with Erdogan at the G20. Obama sought to paper over divisions by reassuring Erdogan that Washington would support Ankara’s efforts to bring those behind the 15 July abortive coup against Erdogan to justice, even though it is widely acknowledged that the US at the very least tacitly supported it.

Erdogan pointedly told the press afterwards, with reference to Syrian Kurdish organisations considered by Ankara to be terrorist, “All forms of terrorism are bad. All forms of terrorism are evil.”

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