

President Obama has finally and most reluctantly agreed to arm the Syrian rebels. But he is still clinging to the Geneva 2 conference as the most preferred option. David Ignatius writing in the Washington Post Thursday June 20th said that President Obama doesn't have a strategy and is still playing for a negotiated diplomatic transition.

Nehad Ismail argues in this article that it is not the use of Sarin gas or chemical weapons that has led to the sudden change of strategy. It is the direct intervention by Iran and Hezbollah in the conflict on the Bashar al Assad's side and the routing of the rebels in Qusair which alarmed the US administration, and was the catalyst for the change. If this success is repeated elsewhere that would be the end of the revolution and a major victory for the Moscow, Tehran and Damascus alliance.

Even after Obama's announcement that the United States would arm the rebels, Moscow, Washington and the EU have been discussing the mechanics of Geneva 2. The G8 leaders who met recently at Belfast Northern Ireland called for a peace conference to be held in Geneva as soon as possible. Most observers believe that the conference is unlikely to be held and even if it is held at some future date it is bound to fail. So what does the West wants from Geneva 2?

In my humble opinion the US administration and the EU have welcomed Geneva 2 as a ploy to procrastinate and avoid making firm commitments to help the Syrian people. The Russians are very keen on Geneva 2 as a mechanism to keep their man Bashar al Assad in power. It is a blatant delaying tactic to prevent the arming of the opposition and to prolong the life of the Damascus regime.

On the other side the opposition will not attend the conference unless the agenda includes the stepping down of Bashar al Assad, which Russia stubbornly refuses. Reuters reported Wednesday June 19th the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying "...the upcoming peace conference in Geneva on the conflict in Syria should not imply any capitulation on the part of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad."

If the opposition insists on Bashar Al Assad's removal, then no conference, no negotiations. Therefore it seems unlikely that the Geneva 2 will work.

Russia's obstructive role is not new

In 1999 Russia vetoed US efforts to secure a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing military action against Yugoslavia. In 2003 Russia used the same tactics to frustrate a resolution calling for military action against Iraq.

In January 2007 Russia and China vetoed a resolution against the Burmese military junta in Myanmar. In July 2008 both Russia and China rejected sanctions against the Robert Mugabe's odious regime in Zimbabwe.

I was not surprised that Russia and China had vetoed a European-backed UN Security Council Resolution that threatened sanctions against the Syrian regime if it did not immediately halt its military crackdown against civilians. The resolution would have been the first such legally binding move adopted by the Security Council since the Syrian Regime began using its military machine against protesters in mid-March 2011 in the town of Deraa. Three times Russia and China vetoed a resolution intended to pressure the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power. The Russian-led vetoes are proof of the country's influence, but have also served to render the international body impotent in this matter.

In the 68-year history of the United Nations, Russia has cast 130 vetoes, more than the number cast by the United States and Great Britain combined.

Obama dithers

With the departure of Hillary Clinton, and the appointments of John "We don't believe in a military solution" Kerry as secretary of state and Chuck Hagel as secretary of defence, Obama made it clear that the US president was more interested in a political solution than a military one. What's not so clear is whether the appointment of Susan Rice as national security advisor will change that.

Two years ago President Obama demanded that Bashar al Assad steps down, but has done nothing to enforce it. For two years President Obama has been dithering, making vague, and

confusing statements regarding Syria. Obama's paralysis enabled al Qaeda to set up shop in Syria. To most people in the Middle East Obama proved to be indecisive, ambivalent, weak and totally unconvincing.

Obama's message to Bashar al Assad seems to have been : "Hi Bashar, you have the green light to slaughter as many Syrians as you like providing you stick to the rules. You may use all sorts of conventional weapons, military jets, high explosives, Scud missiles, but please don't use gases or chemicals, because if you do, I am in trouble. I will be pressurised to act".

A number of Senators think that the recent decision by the administration to arm the rebels is a hasty march to war and are opposed to arming the rebels. As a consequence, there is as yet no timescale or any commitment to any particular equipments.

On the other hand, Senator John McCain and other such as Senator Lindsey Graham, Joe Lieberman and Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee criticised Obama's naively backing the rebels without giving them the military tools to win, such as a no-fly zone and anti-aircraft weapons.

Questions for Obama

Does the Obama administration seriously believe that it is in the US interest for Iran and Hezbollah, aided and abetted by Russia to determine the future of Syria?

Does Obama want Iran and Hezbollah to control Syria as they do in Lebanon and Iraq?

Does Washington want Tehran to call the shots in the wider Middle East?

Is it not a strategic US interest to defeat this unholy alliance of Iran, Hezbollah and Russia?

Does it surprise Obama that Iraq is backing this alliance with money, materials and men?

President Obama must arm the rebels and ditch a Geneva 2 process which will not succeed.

Nehad Ismail is a UK based writer/broadcaster