The Russian proposal – Iraq redux?

By EFRAIM A. COHEN

Not surprisingly, the Obama administration has grasped the Russian lifeline and declared victory. The White House claims that, had it not been for a credible threat of military force, Syria would never have considered placing its chemical weapons under international control. But the cure may be worse than the disease. Will the Russian proposal work, and what are the likely ramifications?

First, let’s consider what happened in an analogous situation – Iraq under Saddam Hussein:

Following the first Gulf War, the UN Security Council called for the removal of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. From 1991 to 2003, the Security Council passed several resolutions reinforcing the restrictions on Saddam’s government. (As a US diplomat, I was directly involved in this process.) The goal was to convince Saddam to alter his brutal internal policies and terminate his WMD program.

But Saddam continued to brutalize his own people while refusing to cooperate with the UN’s WMD inspectors. Time after time, Saddam stated that he would allow full inspection of his suspected WMD sites, only to renege on his promise or interfere with inspections at the last minute.

The situation on the ground today is substantially more complex and there is no guarantee that Syrian President Bashar Assad will cooperate any more than did Saddam. Unlike Iraq, Syria is in the midst of a civil war. It is estimated that Syria has thousands of tons of chemical weapons. Even if Assad were to turn them over tomorrow, it could take years to neutralize them.

Actually, we are about to enter into a period of protracted negotiations. The weapons must be identified (more than half of the weapons sites may be hidden), and modalities of inspection, safeguard and transfer must be developed. Who will protect the inspectors, and what will happen if chemical weapons are used by Assad or a rogue element of his military during negotiations?

As with Iraq, it is in Assad’s interest to extend the negotiations as long as possible. In the meantime, he will continue to murder his own people – using only conventional weapons, of course. In the end, the negotiations may well fall apart with nothing to show for the effort.

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Let us assume that there is positive movement in the negotiations, and that – wonder of wonders – Assad actually turns over his WMD. What will have been achieved?

Two years ago President Barack Obama stated in no uncertain terms that “Assad must go.” Implementation of the Russian proposal requires ongoing official interaction with the current government. In effect, Obama will have accepted Assad as Syria’s legitimate ruler for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps more importantly for Israel, the purpose of Obama’s “red line” (which he now denies having drawn) was to punish Assad for using WMD, so that other countries would be deterred from committing similar crimes. The administration itself has entirely removed that concept from the table.

The Russian “solution” may prevent Assad from using WMDs again, but there is no penalty for his previous use of them. It is as if police told a serial killer to turn over his gun and promise never to use it again, assuring him that he was free to kill so long as he only used a knife.

As bad as was the halfhearted military action contemplated by Obama, the Russian proposal is even worse when it comes to sending a message to Iran. Under the original Obama plan, the ayatollahs could believe that any US action would be only a pinprick that they could easily withstand. Under the Russian proposal, they may conclude that the world will allow them to use a nuclear weapon once without any serious repercussions. In either case, Iran has no incentive to reduce its nuclear weapons program.

The US is clearly much worse off than it was just a few weeks ago. Russia is stronger, and may well become a major player in the Middle East; Assad is more secure in power; the efficacy of a strike – if one becomes necessary – has been severely degraded; friends and enemies of the US have seen that a weakened America will jump at any option in order to avoid using force. As a result, Israel is now more likely to strike Iran unilaterally rather than rely on the US to do something meaningful.

It is imperative that Syria be prevented from using WMD again. However, unless we get much more from the Russian proposal than we know about right now, this is no victory for anyone who has hoped for an early end to the killing in Syria or a slowdown in Iran’s nuclear program. At best, the US is becoming irrelevant in the region. At worst, we may be witnessing the beginning of a precipitous decline in its role as a superpower. White House celebrations are certainly premature.

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