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Article 1.

Bloomberg

Obama and Assad Buy a Precious Commodity: Time

Fouad Ajami<=p>

Sep 17, 2013 -- Asl= Aydintasbas, a young Turkish columnist with steely nerves and a keen grasp of Middle Eastern politics, sent a note from Istanbul to a Hoover Institution blog where it will be published later this month. Her title tells the story: "Where Have the Americans Gone? Who Invited the Russians Back?"

It was mission accomplished for and <<http://topics.bloomberg.com/john-kerry/>> Muammar Qaddafi <<http://topics.bloomberg.com/muammar-qaddafi/>> in Libya <<http://topics.bloomberg.com/libya/>> . In their domains, these dictators had preened and strutted, and they =arned of the hell and the fire that would sweep the Arab world were they to be attacked, of the calamity and reversals that would await U.S. forces. Hussein had been the big neighbor next door and had meekly come out of a spider hole to be sent to the gallows three =ears later. Qaddafi's end had been particularly gruesome; the bluster and the money and the mercenaries and the secret tunnels had not protected him.

A tyrant who hails =rom a despised minority sect, the Alawites, who had inflicted death and ruin on his country, Assad wasn't eager to try his luck in the face of the =.S. missiles. Several days of strikes could embolden the Sunni Damascenes, hitherto quiescent in the face of Alawite repression.

The crowd could find its nerve and courage and storm his hideout; the edifice of tyranny built=by his father could crack. In the world he ruled -- what remains of it -- = reprieve offered by the Russians could be passed off as victory. Thus a regime that (by its pronouncements) neither owned chemical stockpiles, nor used them, was ready to sign off on a U.S.=Russian proposal to inspect, then destroy, these stockpiles.

American Retreat </=pan>

Assad bought the most precious of commodities: time. He had waited out the early victories of =he opposition. Help from Iran <<http://topics.bloomberg.com/iran/>> , and from the Hezbollah movement, had spared him certain defeat. The

retreat of the Americans would serve as a reminder to the rebellion that the powers aren't done with him, that the West won't redeem and arm the rebels.

In a flash, Assad was willing to sign and ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention. A hermetically sealed realm, he declared, would now be open for international inspectors. That pledge needn't worry him: It was a reasonable bet that the crisis would blow over, that the Americans would weary of the matter of Syria. Let the foreign inspectors scour the chicken coops in the country, let them search the remote Alawite hamlets where stockpiles could be stored and hidden. Assad will have lived to fight another day.

Obama brought to this crisis a willingness to live with a good measure of second-guessing and ridicule. His bet was that the country had changed, that the time-honored traditions of American "credibility" no longer held sway. He had been elected to end wars, not to start them, he had declared time and again. The traditions of rescue of nations in distress he seemed to imply, have died out in American thought and practice.

He is a diminished figure after this debacle. But his devotees never tire. They see wisdom and prudence in the retreat. It is enough for them that Obama isn't George W. Bush <http://topics.bloomberg.com/george-w.-bush/> , and that Syria isn't about to become an American burden.

Fouad Ajami is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and author of "The Syrian Rebellion."

Article 2.

The New York Times

The Man With Pink Hair

Thomas L. Friedman

September 17 - I was at a conference in Bern, Switzerland, last week and struggling with my column. News of Russia's proposal for Syria to surrender its poison gas was just breaking and changing every hour, forcing me to rewrite my column every hour. To clear my head, I went for a walk along the Aare River, on Schiffhaube Street. Along the way, I found a small grocery shop and stopped to buy some nectarines. As I went to pay, I was looking down, fishing for my Swiss francs, and when I looked up at the cashier, I was taken aback: He had pink hair. A huge shock of neon pink hair — very Euro-punk from the 1990s. While he was ringing me up, a young woman walked by, and he blew her a kiss through the window — not a care in the world. Observing all this joie de vivre, I thought to myself: "Wow, wouldn't it be nice to be a Swiss? Maybe even to sport some pink hair?" Though I can't say for sure, I got the feeling that the man with pink hair was not agonizing over the proper use of force against Bashar al-Assad. Not his fault; his is a tiny country. I guess worrying about Syria is the tax you pay for being an American or an American president — and coming from the world's strongest power that still believes, blessedly in my view, that it has to protect the global commons. Barack Obama once had black hair. But his is gray now, not pink. That's also the tax you pay for thinking about the Middle East too much: It leads to either gray hair or no hair, but not pink hair.

Well, bring on the Recian Formula, because our leaders will need it. My big take-away from the whole Syria imbroglio is that — with Europe ailing, China AWOL and the Arab world convulsing — for an American president to continue to lead

will require more help from Vladimir Putin, because our president will get less help from everyone else, including the American people. Everyone is focusing on Obama's unimpressive leadership in this crisis, but for my money the two main players who shaped the outcome — in ways that would not have been predicted but will have huge long-term implications — were Putin and the American people. Obama got blindsided by both. What does it tell us?

The fact that Americans overwhelmingly told Congress to vote against bombing Syria for its use of poison gas tells how much the divide on this issue in America was not left versus right, but top versus bottom. Intervening in Syria was driven by elites and debated by elites. It was not a base issue. I think many Americans could not understand why it was O.K. for us to let 100,000 Syrians die in a civil war/uprising, but we had to stop everything and bomb the country because 1,400 people were killed with poison gas. I and others made a case why, indeed, we needed to redraw that red line, but many Americans seemed to think that all we were doing is drawing a red line in a pool of blood. Who would even notice?

Many Americans also understood that when it came to our record in the Arab/Muslim world since 9/11, we were 0 for 3. Afghanistan seems headed for failure; whatever happens in Iraq, it was overpaid for; and Libya saw a tyrant replaced by tribal wars. I also think a lot of people look at the rebels in Syria and hear too few people who sound like Nelson Mandela — that is, people fighting for the right to be equal citizens, not just for the triumph of their sect or Shariah. It's why John McCain's soaring interventionist rhetoric was greeted with a "No Sale." I also think the public picked up on Obama's ambivalence — his Churchillian, this-must-not-stand rhetoric, clashed with his "On second thought, I'm going to ask Congress's permission before I make a stand, and I won't call lawmakers back from vacation to do so." The bombing was going to be bigger than a "pinprick" but also "unbelievably small." It just did not add up.

Finally, there was an "Are you kidding?" question lurking beneath it all — a sense that with middle-class incomes stagnating, income gaps widening and unemployment still pervasive for both white- and blue-collar workers, a lot of Americans were asking: "This is the emergency you are putting before Congress? Syria? Really? This is the red line you want to draw? I'm out of work, but this Syria thing is what shall not stand?"

As for Putin, if he had not intervened with his proposal to get Syria to surrender all its chemical weapons, Obama would have had to either bomb Syria without Congressional approval or slink away. So why did Putin save Obama? In part, no doubt, because he felt the only way he could save his client, the Syrian president, was by also saving the American president. But the bigger factor is that Putin really wants to be seen as a big, relevant global leader. It both feeds his ego and plays well with his base. The question now is: With the American people sidelined and Putin headlined, can we leverage Putin's intervention to join us in also forging a cease-fire in Syria and maybe even move on to jointly try to end the Iran nuclear crisis.

I agree with Obama in this: no matter how we got here, we're in a potentially better place. So let's press it. Let's really test how far Putin will go with us. I'm skeptical, but it's worth a try. Otherwise, Obama's hair will not just be turned gray by the Middle East these next three years, he'll go bald.

Article 3.

Stratfor <<http://www.stratfor.com/>>

Ideology Trumps American Strategy in Syria

George Friedman <http://www.realclearworld.com/authors/george_friedman/>

September 17, 2013 -- It is said that when famed Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternich heard of the death of the Turkish ambassador, he said, "I wonder what he meant by that?" True or not, serious or a joke, it points out a problem of diplomacy. In searching for the meaning behind every gesture, diplomats start to regard every action merely as a gesture. In the past month, the president of the United States treated the act of bombing Syria as a gesture intended to convey meaning rather than as a military action intended to achieve some specific end. This is the key to understanding the tale that unfolded over the past month.

When President Barack Obama threatened military action in retaliation for what he claimed was the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, he intended a limited strike that would not destroy the weapons. Destroying them all from the air would require widespread air attacks over an extensive period of time, and would risk releasing the chemicals into the atmosphere. The action also was not intended to destroy Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime. That, too, would be difficult to do from the air, and would risk creating a power vacuum that the United States was unwilling to manage. Instead, the intention was to signal to the Syrian government that the United States was displeased.

The threat of war is useful only when the threat is real and significant. This threat, however, was intended to be insignificant. Something would be destroyed, but it would not be the chemical weapons or the regime. As a gesture, therefore, what it signaled was not that it was dangerous to incur American displeasure, but rather that American displeasure did not carry significant consequences. The United States is enormously powerful militarily and its threats to make war ought to be daunting, but instead, the president chose to frame the threat such that it would be safe to disregard it.

Avoiding Military Action

In fairness, it was clear at the beginning that Obama did not wish to take military action against Syria. Two weeks ago I wrote that this was "a comedy in three parts: the reluctant warrior turning into the raging general and finding his followers drifting away, becoming the reluctant warrior again." Last week in Geneva, the reluctant warrior reappeared, put aside his weapons and promised not to attack Syria.

When he took office, Obama did not want to engage in any war. His goal was to raise the threshold for military action much higher than it had been since the end of the Cold War, when Desert Storm, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq and other lesser interventions formed an ongoing pattern in U.S. foreign policy. Whatever the justifications for any of these, Obama saw the United States as being overextended by the tempo of war. He intended to disengage from war and to play a lesser role in general in managing the international system. At most, he intended to be part of the coalition of nations, not the leader and certainly not the lone actor.

He clearly regarded Syria as not meeting the newly raised standard. It was embroiled in a civil war, and the United States had not been successful in imposing its will in such internal conflicts. Moreover, the United States did not have a favorite in the war. Washington has a long history of hostility toward the al Assad regime. But it is also hostile to the rebels, who -- while they might have some constitutional democrats among their ranks -- have been increasingly falling under the influence of radical jihadists. The creation of a nation-state governed by such factions would re-create the threat posed by Afghanistan and leading to Sept. 11, and do so in a country that borders Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon. Unless the United States was prepared to try its hand again once again at occupation and nation-building, the choice for Washington had to be "none of the above."

Strategy and the specifics of Syria both argued for American distance, and Obama followed this logic. Once chemical weapons were used, however, the reasoning shifted. Two reasons explain this