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In focus

## MOUNTING PRESSURE UNLIKELY TO SWAY OBAMA ON SYRIA

By Andrew Beatty

Exasperated US diplomats are in open revolt over Barack Obama's Syria policy, but radical change is unlikely in the twilight of his presidency. More than 280,000 people have been killed. Millions more have fled their homes. A relentless drumbeat of cluster bombs, barrel bombs, chemical bombs, murder, rape and torture has turned swathes of Syria to dust.

Humanitarian aid sometimes drips into the beleaguered cities, but when it does, President Bashar Al-Assad's regime makes sure "punishment" bombings quickly follow. "The Assad regime's actions defy all definitions of human decency," said one US official. There are ominous signs the regime is moving to strangle food production. In Syria, "you think you've reached the bottom and then you hear a faint scratching from below," another official said.

Through it all, the Obama administration has insisted only Assad and his Russian and Iranian sponsors can end the madness. But privately, even senior diplomats admit that their inability to stop five years of butchery has challenged their conscience. They say that whatever comes next, Syria will have left an indelible stain on their years in public service.

In a deliberately leaked memo, 51 serving US diplomats have now said "enough," insisting that Obama has a moral obligation to stop the carnage. To force Assad into real peace negotiations, they say the 44th president must launch airstrikes against the Syrian regime. Such a policy, they argue, could increase the cost of Assad's intransigence and perhaps stem the suffering.

The White House has quickly signaled it is not ready to embark on such a 180 degree shift. "The president has always been clear that he does not see a military solution to the crisis in Syria and that remains the case," White House spokeswoman Jennifer Friedman said in response to the memo.

The White House has stuck fast to a credo-borne from the folly of the Iraq war—that the United States should not, indeed cannot, solve all the world's crises. Above all Obama has tried to avoid entanglements in the Middle East, defining US interests in Syria as part of a counterterrorism effort to dismantle the Islamic State group.

That has left his Secretary of State John Kerry with an unenviable—and probably impossible—task of negotiating an end to the broader crisis with little or no leverage. His counterparts in Moscow or Damascus know Obama's reticence well, and have the upper hand on the ground, so see little incentive to deal.

### Morally vacuous, politically bankrupt

For years diplomat frustration with this perceived fool's errand has been building. Frederic Hof, a former Syria advisor resigned from the Obama administration in protest in 2012. Obama's policy is "morally vacuous and politically bankrupt" he said. It "cruelly and gratuitously leaves innocent civilians at the mercy of a mass murderer."

Today, Assad's regime and its Russian allies are running roughshod over a ceasefire that Kerry helped broker. Critics say it is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between an imperfect ceasefire and no ceasefire at all.

Similarly, Kerry's efforts to get Russia to force Assad to step down have run into the sand. Russia remains either unwilling or unable to help. By leaking the memo in an election year, the diplomats would like Obama to reconsider. They might find allies elsewhere in Washington. CIA and Pentagon efforts to keep Syria's opposition afloat are faltering, even as progress is made in the fight against the Islamic State group. Russian aerial assaults on moderate groups have met no response from Washington, forcing allies to seek the protection of larger, better-armed militant groups, including those linked to Al-Qaeda.

Might an administration led by Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton be much more willing to push back against Assad, check Russian influence and bring America's vast military power to bear? There are signs that Russia wants to make sure the next president, whoever it is, faces a choice only between dealing with Assad or letting the jihadists. Russia recently directly targeted US-backed fighters who had no part in the fight against the regime.

"This is a small tribal fighting force that has been pretty well equipped by the United States and tasked with taking the eastern flank of Syria away from the Islamic State," said Faysal Itani, a Syria analyst at the Atlantic Council, a think tank. "This is as close as you are going to get to a textbook definition of a proxy group." It's an escalation that may leave US-backed fighters, like Obama's own diplomats, asking what US power is worth. — AFP

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## TRUMP STUCK ON GOP'S CALIFORNIA DREAM

By Michael R Blood

Bob Dole thought he could win California with a "fishhook" strategy. George W Bush came armed with \$15 million. John McCain was bullish, too. They all lost.

Donald Trump's prediction that he can capture the biggest prize in the November presidential election, the state's 55 electoral votes, rubs up against a dismal history for Republicans over a generation. The names on the ballot have changed, but the outcome has been the same - double-digit wins for Democrats since 1992.

Here's Trump's challenge: Unite Republicans while finding millions of new supporters in a state where Democrats hold every statewide office and both chambers of the Legislature. They also have a 3.1 million edge in voters, a number equal to the population of Iowa.

In 1996, Dole was brimming with confidence about his chances against then-President Bill Clinton. Dole's campaign aimed to drive up vote margins in Republican-friendly communities down the state's interior spine, then up through coastal counties in the south, roughly in the shape of a fishhook. Money and staff poured in. Dole's running mate, Jack Kemp, had special credentials: He grew up in Los Angeles. It wasn't even close. Clinton ran up a 51-to-38 percent win. "Since 1996, the California electorate has swung even more to the left," said Ken Khachigian, a former chief speechwriter in the Reagan White House who ran Dole's campaign in the state.

### Demographic shifts

"Five months out, it's political practice to rule out any possibility," Khachigian added. But a Republican win in California "comes as close as anything to an exception."

The home turf of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, California was once Republican in presidential elections. But pronounced demographic shifts, particularly a boom in the Hispanic population, have transformed the state. The number of Hispanics, blacks and Asian-Americans combined has outnumbered whites in California since 1998, and Latinos alone now outnumber the white population. Most of the new voters are Democrats or independents who tend to vote like them.

Trump is looking to expand his support at a time when he already faces challenges with Hispanics and women. That stems in part from his promise to build a wall along the border with Mexico and his verbal attacks on US District Judge Gonzalo Curiel, who is hearing a lawsuit against Trump University. Trump also has criticized New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, who heads the Republican Governors Association.

Richard Hoyt, a registered independent from Westminster, in Orange County, is the kind of voter Trump needs to pull his way. But the 64-year-old retired engineer says he's leaning toward Clinton, in part because of Trump's statements about Curiel and the judge's family's Mexican roots.

Hoyt said he would give Trump a "zero for his mannerisms" and added: "I can't imagine how all of the sudden he's going to change."

### Simple arithmetic

Part of Trump's challenge is simple arithmetic. In California's June 7 primary, the billionaire businessman ran essentially unopposed, pulling in about 1.5 million votes, or about 75 percent of the total. Ted Cruz and John Kasich were still on the ballot, though they earlier dropped out of the race. Analysts predict 14 million people are likely to vote in November.

To win, Trump would need a heroic turnout from the state's 4.9 million Republicans, while finding 2 million or more swing voters to get near a majority. Indeed, some of those swing voters could be lurking in counties where Republican candidates have outperformed the party's registration numbers.

But there are more than 8 million Democrats, and the state's 4.2 million independents - about 1 in 4 voters - tilt Democratic. Trump's state director, Tim Clark, emphasized that Trump's supporters are strongly motivated in a year when many voters are looking for candidates from beyond Washington. As an outsider, Trump could appeal to a vast pool of dormant voters soured on status quo politics, Clark said. "Elections are won by those who show up, and those who show up are those motivated by their candidate," Clark added.

### Hispanic turnout

The last significant push by a Republican to win California was in 2000, when Bush was backed by \$15 million, then lost to Democrat Al Gore by 12 points. In 2004, Bush's campaign vowed to

compete in California, but the campaign effectively shut down in early autumn. McCain, the 2008 GOP nominee against Barack Obama, boasted about competing in California, but he lost by 24 points. Mitt Romney suffered a 23-point loss to Obama in 2012. Aside from her registration advantage, Clinton also has a formidable get-out-the-vote operation. The campaign made 2 million phone calls in the final days before the state primary. Trump has no comparable organization. An energized Hispanic turnout is likely, favoring Clinton, who also carried the state in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary.

Republicans remain healthy in pockets of California, including parts of the vast farm belt and the so-called Inland Empire running east and north of Los Angeles. But party registration overall has withered to 27 percent of the state total, compared with 45 percent for Democrats.

Independents now outnumber Republicans in nearly two dozen of the state's 53 congressional districts. Former Gov Pete Wilson, a Ted Cruz supporter who now backs Trump, is the last Republican to win a US Senate race in the state, in 1988.

He acknowledges the steep climb Trump faces, but said in an unpredictable political year Trump could make inroads with independents and voters wary of Clinton. At the minimum, he said Trump could win a tactical victory if he forces Democrats to compete on their own ground. Democrats "will have to respond and they will have to spend time and money here," he said. — AP

## WORRYING 'CLIMATE OF XENOPHOBIA' IN EUROPE

By Stephane Barbier

The UN's refugee chief says a worrying "climate of xenophobia" has taken hold in Europe as the continent struggles with the biggest influx of migrants since World War II.

Speaking to AFP in Tehran at the start of a regional tour, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said European leaders needed to do more to coordinate migration policies and to combat negative stereotypes about refugees. "Refugees... don't bring danger to us, they flee from dangerous places," said Grandi, who took office in January. National leaders need to better explain that immigration "in fact contributes to the development of societies," he said.

"Those who do the opposite, who stir up public opinion against refugees and migrants, have a responsibility in creating a climate of xenophobia that is very worrying in today's Europe," he said. "It provides a negative example to countries further away." Protracted conflicts in particular Syria's five-year civil war have prompted an unprecedented wave of migration to the continent, with a record 1.25 million Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and other migrants entering Europe since January 2015.

The influx has sparked a backlash in some countries, including in Austria where the anti-immigration Freedom Party nearly won the presidency last month and in Hungary where authorities have sealed the border with Serbia with razor wire and made illegal border crossing a criminal offence punishable by jail. Grandi said it was unfortunate that decisions taken last year by the European Union to better handle the influx "were not implemented".

It was, he said, "a missed opportunity" because "each country made decisions separately. Borders closed." He called for "a more collective collegial system of managing refugee flows based on solidarity and burden-sharing between the states, as opposed to trying to do it by themselves with the result that only some countries receive a large number of refugees and others close the borders."

### Focus on Afghanistan

Grandi also called for greater efforts to help those displaced by conflict within their own countries. "Two-thirds of the world's displaced are displaced internally," he said. "We have millions of them in Afghanistan, in Syria, in Iraq,

in Yemen... they are the most difficult to reach because they are usually in the midst of wars therefore it's dangerous to bring assistance."

Grandi, an Italian diplomat long active in UN humanitarian work, was due in Afghanistan on Monday to mark World Refugee Day. He said he wanted to use his first year in office to highlight the plight of that country's refugees. "The Afghan refugee crisis has been unfortunately forgotten repeatedly in its history," he said. It "only gets remembered when something big happens like September 11 and now the arrival of Afghans in Europe among hundreds of thousands others."

The root cause is instability in Afghanistan, he said, adding: "That's why my first message here is let's make peace in Afghanistan." After meeting with Iranian officials

including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Grandi praised Tehran's efforts to assist Afghan refugees.

Iran hosts more than three million immigrants from neighboring Afghanistan, a million of them legally. "The space given to the refugees for assistance, to give them opportunities and protection, is considerable" he said. He pointed to a decree from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last year allowing all Afghan children to be allowed into schools in the Islamic republic.

"There are things that have been done here in Iran that are truly examples for other countries, like giving access for children to the school system," Grandi said. It was "one of the most important gestures that any country has expressed for refugees anywhere in the world in the past few years." — AFP



TEHRAN: UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi during a press conference following a meeting with Iranian Interior Minister in the capital Tehran yesterday. — AFP