

Obama's Syria Strategy at a Crossroads

Exclusive: The Islamic Front's capture of a U.S.-stocked supply depot in northern Syria prompted a suspension of those shipments to "moderate" Syrian rebels. The incident also drove home how Islamists are gaining ground – and why President Obama may shift U.S. strategy, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The CIA has been emptying the shelves of its secret warehouses where it stores light weapons whose origins can't be easily traced back to Washington, sending the materiel to the supposedly "moderate" Syrian rebels. But that "covert operation" is now at a crossroads after Islamists seized a rebel supply depot in northern Syria.

One of President Barack Obama's longtime fears about providing lethal assistance to the Syrian rebels was just that possibility, that U.S.-supplied weapons would fall into the hands of Islamists, even some tied to al-Qaeda, and thus help to make Syria a new base for terrorism aimed at the West.

That nightmare appears to be fast becoming a reality as jihadists swarm into Syria from around the Muslim world, drawing financial and military support from Saudi Arabia and other right-wing Persian Gulf states, and pushing aside the more secular rebels opposing President Bashar al-Assad's government in Damascus.

The latest example of this jihadist trend was the Islamic Front's seizure of the U.S.-backed Supreme Military Council's headquarters and its supply depot containing food, trucks and ammunition near the Turkish border last Friday. The State Department announced on Wednesday that non-lethal supplies to the Syrian rebels would be suspended.

Though the Obama administration presented the suspension as temporary and it does not apparently affect the CIA's lethal supply routes to rebels mostly in the south I'm told that U.S. policy is poised to take what could be a dramatic turn, possibly bringing together an anti-al-Qaeda alliance involving Assad's army, non-Islamist rebels and even Hezbollah forces.

Obama's shift in thinking may become more apparent during upcoming peace talks in Switzerland as U.S. and Russian diplomats look for ways to achieve a power-sharing agreement between Assad's Alawite-dominated regime and the more moderate opposition, which is mostly Sunni. Syria's Alawite minority is an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Many of Syria's Christians also continue to back the secular Assad.

However, if Obama moves toward a political agreement that gives the Sunni majority more power without dismantling Assad's government, the President is sure to be confronted with fierce opposition from the new Saudi-Israeli alliance which has formed around a joint determination to shatter the so-called Shiite Crescent, which now reaches from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

Both Saudi Arabia and Israel see Iran as their principal adversary in the region and view the Assad regime as the keystone of Iran's influence. Though Saudi Arabia and Israel might have preferred less extremist Sunni jihadists to win Syria's civil war, both countries have indicated a preference for radical Sunnis ruling Syria over Assad, the Iranian ally.

In mid-September, Israel's Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren announced that Israel wanted Saudi-backed extremists to win if the other possible outcome was continuation of the Iran-backed Assad.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc," Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview. "We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the other "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Obama's Reluctance

But President Obama has grown increasingly leery of the Saudi-Israeli alliance and its obsession with Iran. Over the past several months, he has tilted more toward the Russian position favoring power-sharing concessions from the Assad regime, perhaps even Assad's eventual departure, but to hold the line against a jihadist victory.

That recognition was a factor in Obama's decision last summer not to launch military strikes in response to a chemical weapons incident on Aug. 21. The President came to realize that even a limited series of missile attacks to "degrade" Assad's military might have played into the hands of the jihadists who were being encouraged by the Saudis to seize that moment for a major, possibly decisive offensive.

Obama also feared that U.S. military intervention in Syria might have led to a regional conflagration fought along sectarian lines, pitting the Sunnis against the Shiites, with the Israelis siding with the Sunnis under the old theory that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Instead of a possible rapprochement with Shiite-ruled Iran, the United States might have found itself joining Israel in aerial bombardments of Iran's nuclear facilities.

Peering down that dark alleyway, Obama recoiled. He began searching for a different route, one that would use diplomacy to rid the Syrian government of its chemical weapons and get Iran to accept more restrictions on its nuclear program to ensure that a nuclear bomb would not be built.

Now, I'm told, Obama's thinking has evolved into a vision of a new strategic order in the Middle East, with Iran and Russia joining with the United States to tamp down the violence across the region and forcing the Israelis to choose between Saudi Arabia (and its jihadist clients) or Obama's diplomatic initiative to address longstanding problems, including the Palestinian issue.

One source familiar with the Obama administration's approach said the recent shifts put Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a tough and possibly untenable spot, either abandoning his hard-line attitudes or facing a political challenge from more moderate Israelis.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has been particularly open in his criticism of Netanyahu for alienating the Obama administration. Recently, Olmert accused Netanyahu of "losing his head," "declaring war on the United States" and trying to incite the Congress against Obama. But Olmert is far from alone in his opinions. Several ex-Mossad officials have challenged Netanyahu's obsessive and belligerent approach toward Iran, too.

But it seems unlikely that Netanyahu will back down from this fight. He has yoked up his defenders in the U.S. news media and Congress and gotten them to pull together with hopes of toppling Obama's diplomatic initiatives. Members of Congress, in thrall to the Israel lobby, are pushing for new economic sanctions against Iran which the Iranians warn will destroy the interim nuclear accord.

Neocons Fight Back

Official Washington's still-influential neocons also haven't abandoned their long-range strategy dating back to their work on Netanyahu's 1996 campaign to make a "clean break" with frustrating diplomacy and replacing it with an aggressive "regime change" approach across the region.

The plan to dump negotiations in favor of dumping adversarial leaders was outlined in a 1996 policy paper, entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" and prepared by prominent neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, for Netanyahu's campaign for prime minister.

In the document, the neocons wrote: "Israel can shape its strategic environment ... by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right, as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions."

[See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

The overriding point of this neocon strategy, as it has evolved over nearly two decades, is that by imposing "regime change" in Muslim nations that are deemed hostile to Israel, new friendly governments could be put in place, thus leaving Israel's close-in enemies Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon without outside sponsors. Starved of money, these troublesome enemies would be forced to accept Israel's terms. "The Realm" would be secured.

But that strategy always required a U.S. president who was either onboard or could be steered in the desired direction. Bill Clinton could only be pushed so far toward invading Iraq, but George W. Bush eager to prove his mettle as a post-9/11 "war president" went all in on the neocon strategy, starting by ousting Iraq's Saddam Hussein. Syria and Iran were always the neocons' next targets, but the Iraq War went badly, leaving phase two and phase three on the drawing boards, not implemented but not forgotten.

When Barack Obama was elected president, Prime Minister Netanyahu chose to play hardball with the newcomer and achieved some success in pushing Obama around during the first term. But Netanyahu knew that Obama was a reluctant ally when it came to finishing the neocon plan. Obama resisted war with Iran and dragged his heels on intervening in Syria.

So, Netanyahu publicly threw his support behind Republican nominee Mitt Romney, who made it clear that he would align U.S. foreign policy with whatever Netanyahu wanted to do. However, Romney lost to Obama and Netanyahu had to revert to his old tactics of browbeating Obama and edging him toward the conflicts.

A major turning point came last summer when Obama was nearly stampeded into a military assault on Syria over a murky chemical weapons incident outside Damascus on Aug. 21. The Israelis, the neocons and many liberal interventionists (including some of Obama's top aides) jumped to the conclusion that Assad's regime was to blame for the attack. Obama weighed the possibility of a limited military reprisal.

But some U.S. intelligence analysts had serious doubts about who caused the deaths from sarin gas and they refused to sign on to an intelligence estimate that rushed to the Assad-did-it judgment. At the last minute, even as many White House aides expected U.S. missiles to start flying, Obama abruptly reversed course and began looking for a diplomatic way out. He was helped by the Russians who persuaded Assad to destroy his chemical arsenal even as he continued denying blame for the Aug. 21 attack.

That turnaround on attacking Syria was followed by an interim agreement with Iran to constrain its nuclear program – and now a plan for Syrian peace talks. Suddenly, it seemed like cooler heads might prevail. But Saudi Arabia, particularly its energetic intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and Israel, at least as personified by Prime Minister Netanyahu, won't give up on their determination to shatter the Shiite Crescent.

Yet, it is becoming harder and harder to sell the American people on why they should spend billions and billions of dollars more and send more of their young men and women off to kill and be killed because of some Islamic sectarian struggle that dates back 1,400 years or because some Israeli leaders want to continue a violent strategy of "regime change."

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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From Editor Robert Parry: A family foundation has agreed to make a \$10,000 "challenge grant" to Consortiumnews, meaning that we need to raise that much

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Again, thanks for your support and for making our 18 years of honest journalism possible.

Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.

The Bigger Risk: Private v. Public Spying

The fear of NSA's metadata collection is as much in the potential for Big Brother government as in the present or as Edward Snowden says a "turnkey tyranny" all ready to go but private-sector abuses are another worry, ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar writes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The collection and maintaining of huge files of information on our communications, our movements, our online searching, and much else about our individual lives is, [as Laura Bate notes](#), hardly something that the National Security Agency or any other arm of government originated. By far the greater share of the assembling, and the exploitation, of storehouses of data about the activities of individual Americans occurs in the private sector.

So why should there be so much fuss about what a government agency may be doing along this line, while there is equanimity about the much greater amount of such activity by non-government enterprises? Is there something intrinsic to government that ought to make us more worried about such data mining? Let us consider the possible bases for concluding that there might be.

Potentially the strongest such basis has to do with the presence or absence of a free market, and related to that, whether or not the activity of the individuals on which data are being collected is voluntary. When I use a search engine on the Internet I am voluntarily using a free service in return for being exposed to some advertising and allowing the operator of the search engine or my Internet service provider to collect, and exploit, data about my interests.

Most interactions with government agencies and especially security agencies do not involve as much voluntarism. So maybe it is logical to be more persnickety for this reason about what government entities are doing.

That makes sense as far as it goes. But in practice the logic quickly runs up against the fallacy of equating the private sector with free markets and free will. If I want land-line telephone service at my home (and I very much do), I'm stuck with Verizon. I am forced to let Verizon collect comprehensive records of my calls, the "metadata" we've heard so much about.

And of course, if someone at Verizon wanted to listen in on the substance of my calls that could be done as well, although it is a reputable company and I would be surprised if that were happening. The point is that there is much less free will and free choice in private sector data-generating activity than we might like to think, and in many cases little or no more free choice than when a government agency is involved.

This is true not just of local utility monopolies such as land-line telephone systems but to a large degree of other services in the Internet age. Some such services, including online access itself, have quickly transitioned from being seen as nifty innovations to being regarded as necessities.

And again, free choice is often much less than we would like. This fact was recognized with the antitrust action against Microsoft, which was using its commanding position in operating systems to muscle into a bigger share of the market for browsers and other applications.

When there is enough market competition for users theoretically to vote with their feet, or with their fingers on the keyboard, if they are worried about what is being done with data collected on them, in practice any market correction mechanism would be very slow and clumsy.

Imagine that a rogue employee at Google started using information about embarrassing web searches to ruin the reputations of particular people he was out to get. If that sort of abuse happened enough times, then perhaps significant numbers of users would abandon Google's wonderfully effective search engine in favor of Bing or something else, and Google would become less able to sell as much advertising as it does now. But the corrective process would be slow and awkward, and in the meantime a bunch of people would have their reputations ruined.

Another possible basis for distinguishing the amassing of data in the public and private sectors is to ask what controls or checks apply to each. Here there is indeed a big difference, and the difference is in the direction of there being far more controls and checks applied to government agencies than to private sector enterprises.

For the security agencies there is the whole legal structure, dating back to the 1970s and strengthened since then, of restrictions and congressional oversight. Nothing remotely resembling those sorts of external controls exists for data mining in the private sector.

Then there are all the internal checks and controls, which as Bate mentions in the case of NSA are extensive. These include compartmentation of information, second nature to the security agencies, which use compartmentation to protect sensitive national security information even if there is no issue of the personal privacy of U.S. citizens.

NSA senior management says publicly that only 22 people at their agency are able to query the telephone metadata that are of concern. How many people at Verizon can do something with the comprehensive record of my telephone calls? I don't have the faintest idea, and probably no one else outside Verizon does either.

Another question to ask is how the public and private sectors may differ regarding the potential for abuse, in terms of not just access and capability but also incentives. For most conceivable types of individual abuse, there is no reason to expect the incentives for individual abuse to appear more in one type of organization than the other.

A potential abuser thinking of, say, looking at an ex-spouse's calling record may pop up in either the public or private sector. Disincentives to this kind of abuse probably are stronger in the security agencies, given the regular reinvestigation regimen that people with security clearances undergo.

As for incentives that are more institutional than individual, there are further differences. As an example of a mistaken and destructive use of data mining,

think of an innocent person being put on a no-fly list and, as a result, having his business damaged because of his inability to fly.

Government agencies have no conceivable incentive for this to happen. For them, false positives merely add clutter and make it more difficult to accomplish their assigned mission, such as keeping real terrorists off airplanes. And when a mistake of this sort does happen and becomes public, such as putting Ted Kennedy on a no-fly list, it is an embarrassment to the agencies responsible.

In the private sector, however, there always are commercial and financial interests in play. Those interests may well provide an incentive, such as for competitors in the same line of business, to damage the business of someone else.

In addition to all of these criteria, one also should ask what benefit or greater good is going to the person about whom data are being collected, as well as perhaps to others. What is being bought, in other words, in return for whatever risks or intrusions are involved in amassing the data?

With the sort of data mining that NSA does, the presumed benefit is in the form of greater protection against terrorists, or perhaps other contributions to national security. There has been debate, of course, about just how much of this type of benefit is being obtained, but at least the objective is one that most Americans would consider important.

The corresponding answer for private sector use of big data is harder to come up with. It would seem to consist of something like better tailoring of ads that appear on the user's computer screen, which might streamline online shopping. Nice, perhaps, but hardly in the same league as national security.

Two overall conclusions follow. One is that there are substantially stronger reasons to worry about the collection and use of big data in the private sector than in government agencies.

The other is that the prevailing pattern of public consternation about this subject being nevertheless focused on government agencies indicates that the consternation is not driven by any careful consideration of risks, costs, benefits, incentives and choices. Instead it is driven by a crude image of government agencies, and especially certain types of government agencies, as Big Brothers worthy of suspicion or even loathing.

Sentiments toward private-sector enterprises vary, but the biggest contrast to the image of government is enjoyed by the titans of Silicon Valley and the enterprises they run, having the status of heroes.

The crudeness driving the sentiments is one of the main reasons (inconsistency over time in what the American public expects from the government agencies involved is another big reason) we should not be surprised if morale at a place such as NSA is low.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Racism Through Rose-Colored Glasses

Many Americans tend to whitewash their country's ugly history of racism all the better to feel good about "exceptionalism" but even sophisticated writers can ignore this grim reality when praising their favored presidents, as William Loren Katz explains.

By William Loren Katz

In 2013, we have Barack Obama, a two-term African-American President, hundreds of other black men and women elected to state and local offices, and a country that officially celebrates Black History Month. Even more, no white official would dare *publicly* use a racist slur. As a result, many of our intellectuals, historians and media writers are onboard with the pleasing message: "We live in a post-racial America."

Well, maybe. Bill Keller, who served for eight years as executive editor of *The New York Times*, and is the author of a children's book on Nelson Mandela, recently wrote the *Sunday Times Book Review's* front page essay on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *The Bully Pulpit*, which examines Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Keller extolled them as "politicians of stature and conscience."

Really? As presidents neither made any serious effort to improve race relations or protect minorities from violence. Neither challenged the forces promulgating segregation, discrimination, and lynching.

Though their Republican Party controlled the House and Senate from 1900 to 1910, neither Roosevelt nor Taft paid more than lip service to Abraham Lincoln's "new birth of freedom." Neither enforced the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments that promised former slaves liberty, justice, and equality. Neither challenged "the new slavery", the debt-peonage, sharecropping and convict-lease

systems that ground down millions in the South.

Roosevelt spoke as a proud champion of “the Anglo-Saxon race,” and urged his people to embrace “the clear instinct for race selfishness.” He advocated imperialism with the claim, “It is wholly impossible to avoid conflicts with the weaker races.”

Roosevelt and Taft vigorously courted Southern “lily-white” members of both parties. During an era of weekly Southern lynching carnivals, Roosevelt told a black audience the “rapists and criminals” among them “did more harm to their race than any white man can possibly do them.”

In 1909, President Taft told African-American college graduates in North Carolina: “Your race is meant to be a race of farmers, first, last and for all times.” Taft had the distinction of being the first Republican presidential candidate to campaign in the South. He announced he would never enforce “social equality” and told black audiences that the white Southern man was their “best friend.” People of color could find little comfort, justice or even safety during the age of Roosevelt and Taft.

But this is a different time, and we as a nation wish to move toward “a more perfect union,” to follow the Constitution and embrace its promises. Why then do some intelligent people still manage to distort our past to send a wrong message? Perhaps they do so because lying about the past makes it easier to dissemble about the present.

As Richard Cohen wrote in the Washington Post in November, “Today’s G.O.P. is not racist, as Harry Belafonte alleged about the Tea Party, but it is deeply troubled, about the expansion of government, about immigration, about secularism, about the mainstreaming of what used to be the avant-garde.

“People with conventional views must repress a gag reflex when considering the mayor-elect of New York, a white man married to a black woman and with two biracial children. (Should I mention that Bill de Blasio’s wife, Chirlane McCray, used to be a lesbian?) This family represents the cultural changes that have enveloped parts, but not all, of America. To cultural conservatives, this doesn’t look like their country at all.”

Sadly, just as Cohen claims that much of America is post-racial, modern influencers such as Keller would have us believe that Taft and Roosevelt were also not racist, they were simply presidents who advocated for policies that would ensure that “traditional” values would continue to rule. Never mind that many of those values had racial animosity at their core.

We can’t move toward the fulfillment of the Constitution, *for the common good* ,

if we either continue to see the past through a racial revisionist lens or continue to misconstrue the racism in our present. It might be more accurate to state that some white American die-hards of a racist past have no choice but to live in a future world embracing Mandela's principles of racial tolerance as much as they might prefer "traditional" attitudes.

While these Americans may celebrate Mandela's courage and achievements in the abstract, they cannot fully digest this brave South African who sacrificed his freedom and life for a world where people of all races, ethnicities and kinds will try to live in peace and harmony.

William Loren Katz is the author of *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*
