

In Case You Missed...

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Any Thank-You Gifts Gone Missing?

From Editor Robert Parry: Our Spring Fund Drive ended in late April, so the thank-you gifts should have arrived by now – either the "Kill the Messenger" movie DVD plus the CD of Gary Webb and me discussing the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1996 (for donations of \$150 or more) or just the CD (for donations of lesser amounts).

If you qualified for a gift, wanted it and didn't get it, please contact me at

consortnew@aol.com and we will send it out promptly.

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Again, thanks for your support and for making our nearly two decades 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.

Sacrificing Yemen to Appease Saudis

In pandering to the Saudi royals, President Obama has tolerated and even aided their aerial pummeling of their poverty-stricken neighbor Yemen. But the Saudi rush to bomb the Houthis may have destroyed a promising UN peace accord – and killed hundreds of civilians, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Jamal Benomar, the former United Nations mediator in Yemen, caused a diplomatic stir when he told me recently that a dozen Yemeni parties, including the Houthis, were close to a power-sharing deal until the first Saudi bomb dropped on Yemen on March 26.

Benomar said there was agreement on all major points except for the role of the presidency, but that this progress was disrupted by the Saudi air campaign.



Though the Houthis were occupying the capital and had arrested President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi until his escape to Aden, they still accepted a reduced role for him as a transitional president, according to Benomar. They also agreed to withdraw their militia from Sanaa to be replaced by a national unity security force that UN experts had prepared. In return, the Houthis would have gotten about a 20 percent share in government.

“When this campaign started, one thing that was significant but went unnoticed is that the Yemenis were close to a deal that would institute a power-sharing with the Houthis,” Benomar told me. “So there was a way of stopping that.”

Asked about Benomar's remarks to me, the U.S. State Department blamed the Houthis for derailing the talks. But Benomar strongly disputes this. The Houthis were at the table until the end and didn't need to be bombed to return to it, he told me. They know they aren't strong enough to rule all of Yemen, but likewise insist that Yemen cannot be ruled without them.

Hadi rejected any dilution of his powers. Still, the search for a compromise continued until Hadi called for Saudi intervention as the Houthis moved southward. The Saudi bombing then shattered the UN-brokered process. And Benomar quit.

Saudi-owned media has vilified him as "the envoy for the Houthi movement" who is "promoting a ridiculous story that Operation Decisive Storm aborted a potential political deal in Yemen."

Reasons for Saudi Intervention

But the question remains: Why have the Saudis pounded Yemen for more than six weeks, killing nearly 1,500 people, according to UN figures? The Saudis have publicly stated three motives: to return Hadi to Yemen as president, to crush the Houthi movement, and to curb Iranian influence in the country.

A month and a half of airstrikes have neither restored Hadi nor defeated the Houthi. And though the Iranians are providing support, even US officials deny that Tehran has operational influence in Yemen.

A diplomat with intimate knowledge of Yemen told me the Houthis aren't "Iranian agents," they "make their own decisions" and "are not into terrorist tactics." They are Zaidi, a different Shi'ite sect than Iran's. The Houthi movement began in the early 1990s, but has only received Iranian support for the last five years. Tehran also criticized the Houthis when they dissolved parliament.

The Houthis aren't in need of massive Iranian arms supplies either. Yemen is one of the most armed places on earth and the Houthis have raided government stocks and been supplied by forces that remained loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who never went away and continued to have a destabilizing influence so he could be seen as the only one to return stability to the country.

This diplomat put forward another hypothesis: that the motive of the Saudi intervention went beyond the Houthis and Iran. He said Riyadh's "bottom line" was to crush the threat of a progressive democracy emerging in their backyard.

"These were Yemenis freely determining their future," he said. "Through negotiations. And negotiations in which the Houthis would have a share."

The deal, which Benomar had reached major agreement on, included giving women 30 percent of cabinet posts and 30 percent of seats in parliament. "In Saudi Arabia next door they are still discussing whether they can drive or not," the diplomat said.

"A progressive agenda evolved that their neighbors were not that excited about," he said. "The Saudis are asserting themselves and they want to impose whatever solution they want."

He said it's been an historical imperative. Riyadh has long tried to impose its "own political dispensation" in Yemen. "Everybody who ruled Yemen was appointed by them," he said.

Saudi 'Arab Spring' Strategy

This fits the Saudi strategy throughout the so-called Arab Spring: prevent democracy from breaking out across the region lest it spreads home, threatening their monarchy.

It's why they crossed the causeway into Bahrain with 1,000 troops in 2011. In that case, too, the talk was of Iranian influence. But the bigger threat was a vast Shia majority that with democratic rights would turn out the Sunni monarchy and embolden the Saudis' own Shia minority.

In Egypt, the Saudis have bankrolled the military overthrow of the country's first democratically elected government. Yes, the late King Abdullah was an opponent of the Muslim Brotherhood. But how it came to power may have been of even more concern.

In Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia has supported less-than democratic opposition – in fact in many cases extremists who would despise the notion of elections and pluralism if they ever seized power.

Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq again are the presumed reasons given for Saudi involvement. There is no doubt that since the 1979 revolution, Iran and Saudi Arabia have seen each other as a spreading menace in the region that has to be stopped. Objectively, they are mirror images of each other (though Iran does have more elements of democracy). Both claim they are acting defensively.

While the West and Israel back the Saudi side and howl about the Iranian threat and its influence, the region's Shia, a marginalized minority for most of Islam's history, see the Saudis and their Sunni allies as the menace and Iran as a protector.

In the end, only some sort of accommodation between Riyadh and Tehran can begin

to solve the region's multiplying crises, from Beirut to Baghdad. If Washington really were a neutral power-broker committed to regional stability that would be its priority.

The Americans have not been overly keen on the Saudi adventure in Yemen, and have pressed Riyadh for a humanitarian pause (that nominally started on Tuesday after a massive bombing campaign in Saada province). Perhaps to alleviate Saudi anger for its rapprochement with Iran, the Americans let the Saudis be diverted in Yemen, to blow off some steam against the Iranians – at the expense of innocent Yemenis.

So the day of a Saudi-Iranian accommodation seems further off than ever, if it ever comes, with direct Saudi involvement in Yemen going beyond anything seen elsewhere in the region. Riyadh seems committed to a military solution. But it knows its goal of destroying the Houthis, and restoring Hadi, or another authoritarian ruler, is impossible without ground forces. And even then there's no guarantee.

Need for Ground Troops

Without combat-hardened troops of their own, the Saudis reached out to Pakistan, who went through a procedure mysterious to the Saudis: a parliamentary vote. And the Pakistani parliament said No.

While the Egyptian military government is heavily dependent on massive Saudi financing, sending Egyptian soldiers back to Yemen 50 years later would be deeply unpopular at home. Of the nearly 70,000 Egyptians soldiers sent then to Yemen, more than 10,000 were killed.

In the 1960s all the roles were reversed. The Saudis backed the Zaidi and fought the Egyptians. That's because the Zaidis had a monarchy overthrown by a republican officers' rebellion, modeled on Nasser's revolution. As they fear democracy's spread today, the Saudis then feared the spread of a republican revolution that was threatening the region's monarchies.

Egypt returning to the quagmire of Yemen would be like the U.S. today re-invading Vietnam.

In the meantime, the Saudis are targeting only the Houthis from the air, the main force fighting al-Qaeda, while leaving the Sunni extremists untouched. This is the al-Qaeda branch that claimed the Paris attack. U.S. drone strikes against them, which have been largely ineffective and kill civilians, have been reduced after the U.S. evacuated its base in Yemen.

Al-Qaeda, which private Saudi money has long backed, since the 1980s in

Afghanistan, has made serious gains on the ground since the Saudi assault began, taking towns and airports.

In the absence of Pakistani or Egyptian forces, al-Qaeda has in essence become the de-facto Saudi ground troops in Yemen, fighting the Houthi. The Saudis have also begun dropping arms to allied tribes near the Saudi border as the instability increases.

Riyadh is looking at a quagmire of its own in Yemen. King Salman might well heed the words of a predecessor, King Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud. In 1934 he told British agent John Philby: "My fathers and grandfathers didn't own Yemen, and no one has been able to achieve security and stability there. Who can rule Yemen with its Zaidis and its problems?"

Evidently for the House of Saud today, chaos and anarchy in Yemen appears to be preferable to a dangerous democracy.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at tjoelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe). [A version of this story originally appeared at Middle East Eye.]

US Politics Gives Saudis an Edge

If President Obama were speaking solely for U.S. national interests, he would offer a stern rebuke, not gentle reassurance, to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States during a Camp David summit, but domestic politics and Israeli pressure will constrain any frankness, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

As crown princes and other leaders of Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf meet this week with President Barack Obama, the first thing to keep in mind as background to this encounter is a truth that the President spoke last month in [an interview with Tom Friedman](#) of the *New York Times*.

The President observed that the biggest threats those Arab countries face "may not be coming from Iran invading. It's going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries" based on "populations that, in some cases, are alienated, youth that are underemployed, an ideology that is destructive and nihilistic, and in some cases, just a belief that there are no legitimate political outlets

for grievances.”

Of course that’s not an observation that the rulers of those countries want to hear, and the President acknowledged that talking about such things is “a tough conversation to have” with those regimes, “but it’s one that we have to have.” Sound foreign policy for our own country requires dealing in truths, even ones that make our interlocutors uncomfortable.

The President would have been on sound ground to make his point even more forcefully than he did. There will be no Iranian flotilla carrying an invasion force against the gulf. Anything remotely resembling such a fanciful scenario would be obvious folly for Iran and, even if were to occur, would be met with a forceful U.S.-led response with or without any explicit security guarantees from Washington.

Nor does it require any instigation from the outside for the danger of internal unrest and instability to arise from the anachronistic, undemocratic political systems, coupled with narrowly based economies and sometimes sectarian-riven social structures, that prevail in these countries. The most serious instability that has occurred in the last few years in the immediate neighborhood of the Gulf Arab countries, in Bahrain and Yemen, was internally initiated and not instigated by any outside power, be it Iran or anyone else.

The next thing to ask about the gathering at Camp David is what these Arab regimes would, or even could, do if they return home displeased. The answer is: not much at all. Those regimes need the United States more than the United States needs them. They are highly reliant on U.S. help just to enable their military forces to operate their advanced weapons. They are even more reliant on the tacit blessing that the world’s most powerful democracy confers on them every day by *not* making much of an issue of their undemocratic nature, notwithstanding how much talk one has heard in Washington, especially under the previous administration, about spreading democratic values in the Middle East.

Moreover, the Gulf states are not in position today to express any displeasure by trying to wield oil as a weapon, 1970s style; Saudi Arabia has its own reasons right now not only to keep oil flowing but to keep prices low.

Administration policymakers surely are smart enough to realize all this, but they feel obligated to play a political game that involves catering to the Gulf Arabs’ expressed anxieties, no matter how opportunistic those expressions may be, hence this week’s meeting.

The game is played mostly within Washington; it is a matter of the administration having to keep the Gulf Arabs from complaining too loudly about

reaching an agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program, lest the administration's domestic opponents amplify their accusations that the administration is selling "allies" down the river (or down the gulf) by making a deal with Tehran.

The nuclear agreement actually does no such thing. The Gulf Arabs have reached their own rapprochements with Iran in the past, and they are smart enough to realize that an agreement that restricts the Iranian program and precludes an Iranian nuclear weapon is better for their own security than the alternative of no agreement and no restrictions.

Although some coddling of the Gulf Arabs may be worth it if this helps reduce the chance that the Iran agreement will be killed in the U.S. Congress, it would be a mistake to extend new security guarantees or similar commitments that would risk entangling the United States more deeply in the Arabs' own peculiar quarrels. Those quarrels involve religion, ethnicity, and intra-regional rivalries where the United States does not have an interest in taking sides, and that give rise to fights in which the United States does not have a dog.

The United States unfortunately has already gotten itself involved in a very local, very messy, and very multi-dimensional fight in Yemen, involvement that would be incomprehensible except as a kind of compensatory stroking of Saudi Arabia. If one looked for a more direct U.S. interest in the Yemeni fight it would involve long-distance terrorist threats from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but AQAP is on the *opposite* side of the Yemeni fight from the people the U.S.-backed Saudi military intervention is going after.

There are good reasons for the United States to maintain cordial and even close relations with the Gulf Arab countries, notwithstanding their political systems and values that are so antithetical to our own. But such relations should be part of an independent and flexible U.S. policy in the Middle East that does not involve getting dragged into other people's pet quarrels and does not involve getting held hostage to the Gulf Arabs' own expressions of displeasure or discomfort.

An additional complication in trying to please such "allies" is that pleasing one can annoy another. More arms sales to the Gulf Arabs has gotten talked about, but that quickly runs into the assumption that whatever any Arab state gets in the way of armaments must be kept inferior to whatever Israel gets.

Israel illustrates better than any other case the futility of trying to buy cooperation from a complaining "ally" with not just arms aid but other supportive measures. The extraordinary largesse, political and material, that the United States bestows on Israel does not buy such cooperation, certainly not

regarding the nuclear agreement on Iran, where the Israeli government vigorously opposes U.S. foreign policy and attempts to sabotage it at every turn.

The Gulf Arabs are too polite to imitate Israel in blatantly poking sticks in their benefactor's eyes. But expect from them a more restrained "what have you done for me lately" posture.

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.)

Obama Panders to Gulf State Sheiks

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have given crucial support to Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists, but President Obama will pander to them anyway at a Camp David summit, a sign of a muddled foreign policy, say Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

Defying escalating rhetoric that Iran is "gobbling up the Middle East," President Barack Obama told the *New York Times* recently that "the biggest threat" to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states may not come from Iran, but "from dissatisfaction inside their own countries."

Yet, displaying how deeply mired in Washington hype his administration remains, Obama has called on GCC leaders to parade with him at Camp David this week as if *Iran is their biggest threat*.

Saudi King Salman has refused to join in this spectacle, underscoring that, in foreign policy, friendship and interest should not be conflated. Obama, by contrast, studiously overlooks this reality that, today, U.S. and Saudi interests on a number of key issues not only diverge, but conflict.

By refusing to deal with GCC states on the basis of interest, rather than friendship, Obama actually helps some of them continue pursuing policies deeply damaging to U.S. interests.

However much GCC elites evoke specters of Iranian "aggressiveness", framed either in essentialist caricatures of "Persian expansionism" or depictions of the Islamic Republic's allegedly radical Shi'a sectarianism, Iran is not the

source of their insecurity. In reality, GCC leaders have felt existentially threatened since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq upended a regional order based on Sunni Arab autocracies linked, in various ways, to Washington.

With U.S. encouragement, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states had supported Iraq's Saddam Hussein financially in the 1980s, as he pursued aggressive war (including extensive chemical weapons use) against Iran. While Saddam eventually threatened GCC states, his overthrow in 2003 created major challenges for some of them, especially Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh could not endorse a more representative post-Saddam Iraqi polity that would, by definition, empower Shi'a, make Sunnis a permanent minority, and boost Iran's influence. So, the Saudis urged militant Sunni *jihadis*, of a sort they had long supported, some of whom had created and remained involved with *al-Qa'ida*, to go to Iraq and help Sunni tribal militias and remnants of Saddam's army destabilize the new Iraqi state, including by attacking U.S. occupation forces.

This trifecta of former members of Saddam's military, Iraqi Sunni fighters, and foreign *jihadis* would eventually give rise to the political/military/religious phenomenon now known as the Islamic State.

In the meantime, GCC anxiety over the erosion of a regional order based on pro-U.S. Sunni autocracies grew more acute as, from 2011, demands mounted in overwhelmingly Sunni Arab societies for expanded political participation and protection from, not collusion with, a U.S. "war on terror" that has killed hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims.

In this context, the "threat" to the GCC from today's Iran is not that it is "Persian" or Shi'a, but that it is simultaneously Islamic and republican, that it seeks to integrate principles and institutions of Islamic governance with participatory politics and elections while maintaining a strong commitment to foreign policy independence.

Paving the Way for Jihadis

GCC leaders are relatively unconcerned about reform calls from secular liberals, judging (rightly) that this agenda elicits limited support in Arab societies. But they worry deeply about Sunni movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, willing to compete for power in elections.

For GCC rulers, these groups are profoundly threatening, for if Muslim-majority Arab publics can elect Islamic governments, the historically most potent argument for monarchy in Arabia, that it is essential to propagating true Islam, goes out the window.

To forestall this, Riyadh and its partners have declared the Brothers “terrorists” in GCC jurisdictions, and have worked to quash them around the region, as with Saudi and Emirati backing for the July 2013 coup against Egypt’s elected Brotherhood government.

By undermining the Brothers as a vehicle for expanding Sunni political engagement, Saudi Arabia and its allies leave *jihadi* groups like *al-Qa’ida* and the Islamic State as the only options for Sunni Arabs dissatisfied with the *status quo*. They make things worse by building up violent *jihadis* as alternatives to the Brothers, in Libya, Syria, and, now, Yemen, with Washington’s collaboration, and with disastrous humanitarian and political consequences.

What has unfolded in Libya since 2011, the state’s destruction, civil war, a U.S. ambassador’s murder, and incubation of a major *jihadi* hub that had not existed before, is hardly due to Iranian perfidy. It is the result of a military campaign, led by America and Saudi Arabia, to bring down the Gaddafi government, and, in the process, show that it wasn’t only pro-Western autocrats who were vulnerable to overthrow.

Many of this campaign’s devastating effects flow from Riyadh’s use of the Libya war to revive *jihadi* cadres worn down by years of fighting U.S. forces in Iraq, cadres the Saudis then deployed in Syria.

Saudi intervention ensured that *jihadis*, many non-Syrian, would dominate Syrian opposition ranks, undercutting any potential role for the Brotherhood in leading anti-Assad forces. It also turned what began in Syria as indigenously generated protests over particular grievances into a heavily militarized (and illegal) campaign against the recognized government of a UN member state, but with a popular base too small either to bring down that government or to negotiate a settlement with it.

It is Saudi policy, not Iran’s support for Syria’s government against an externally-fueled insurgency that, as Syrian oppositionists themselves admit, couldn’t defeat him at the ballot box, that is responsible for Syria’s agony.

Cost of Reckless Strategy

The most glaringly negative consequence of Riyadh’s posture toward both post-Saddam Iraq and the Arab Awakening has been the Islamic State’s explosive ascendance, marked by impressive territorial gains in both Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State’s proclamation of a religiously legitimate caliphate represents a much bigger problem for Saudi Arabia than for the United States.

Yet, while Riyadh has ostensibly joined Washington's anti-Islamic State "coalition," it is doubling down on its *jihadi* proxy strategy. After using the *al-Qa'ida*-affiliated *Jabhat an-Nusra* to destroy non-*jihadi* opposition forces in Syria, Riyadh has persuaded Qatar and Turkey, previously the Syrian Brotherhood's biggest backers, to help it promote a new, *Jabhat an-Nusra*-led *jihadi* alliance that recently captured a major Syrian city.

In Yemen, Saudi airstrikes have helped *al-Qa'ida* make territorial gains, and to eclipse even further the Brotherhood's Yemeni affiliates.

Saudi Arabia pursues these policies, however risky (even reckless) they seem to outsiders, because decision-makers in Riyadh judge that they maximize the ruling family's chances of holding onto power.

The United States, for its part, should continue cooperating with Saudi Arabia where U.S. and Saudi interests overlap. But U.S. interests also require that Washington undertake strategically-grounded diplomacy with all major regional players, including, above all, a rising Iran.

And Washington certainly should be able to confront the Saudis and others in the GCC when they pursue policies contrary to U.S. interests. Like too many of his predecessors, Obama has yet to learn how to do this.

Flynt Leverett served as a Middle East expert on George W. Bush's National Security Council staff until the Iraq War and worked previously at the State Department and at the Central Intelligence Agency. Hillary Mann Leverett was the NSC expert on Iran and from 2001 to 2003 was one of only a few U.S. diplomats authorized to negotiate with the Iranians over Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and Iraq. They are authors of *Going to Tehran*. [This story first appeared at The Wire, a new publication in India. See [here](#).]
