

Obama Tolerates the Warmongers

Exclusive: President Obama is caught between the harsh realities of the Mideast and the fantasy world of Washington's warmongers, but he prefers to risk a global catastrophe than to stand up to the neocons, the liberal hawks, the Israelis and the Saudis, a dilemma that Daniel Lazare explains.

By Daniel Lazare

"Only odd-numbered world wars start in Sarajevo." That was the joke during the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. Though it turned out not to be true, fortunately, a strange echo occurred a few years later when NATO military commander General Wesley Clark threatened to shoot down Russian planes flying paratroopers into Kosovo, prompting a British general to refuse on the grounds that "it's not worth starting World War III."

But war among the great powers may now be in the offing in Syria, where the conflict seems to be exploding on a new and grander scale. Instead of two players, NATO and Russia, it now includes a half dozen or more: the U.S., France and Great Britain, plus Russia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab gulf states. Where the conflicting claims of Bosnians, Serbs and Croats were difficult enough to sort out in former Yugoslavia, the struggle over Syria is an immense tangle in which a growing list of combatants struggle to impose their disparate points of view.

The upshot is a game of chicken that is bigger, bloodier and more intractable than anything in decades. Recognizing that an Islamic State takeover in Syria will lead to another round of jihad in Chechnya, Vladimir Putin sees no alternative but to step up support for the besieged government of Bashar al-Assad. Refusing to stand by while fellow Shi'ites are slaughtered, Iran sees no alternative but to step up support as well.

Determined to halt any expansion by Iran or Hezbollah on its border, Israel increasingly tilts toward ISIS and Al Qaeda, while the Saudis more and more paranoid about a "Shi'ite crescent" extending from Yemen to Bahrain, Syria and even the kingdom's own Eastern Province have vowed to intensify their support for the Sunnis.

Too much is at stake for anyone to back down. An Israeli-Russian rapprochement, which could conceivably defuse the crisis, has long been an intriguing possibility. Israel has refused to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea. After all, Israel's huge Russian immigrant population tilts toward Putin, while the only monument to the victorious Red Army outside the former Soviet bloc lies in the seaside town of Netanya, about ten miles north of Tel Aviv all of which

suggests that it is better disposed to Russia than is generally realized.

If Putin could engineer an agreement that would allow Assad to hold onto power while reining in Hezbollah, Israel would conceivably go along. But Israel fears that Hezbollah will take advantage of any such truce to build up its missile arsenal, which is why in the end it will almost certainly say no.

Besides, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the General Assembly on Thursday, it regards ISIS and Iran as common enemies, “and when your enemies fight each other, don’t strengthen either one weaken both.” Hence, its policy is to prolong the deadlock even though the results in the end may prove more dangerous for the Jewish state rather than less.

Finally, there is the United States. It has a relatively young, hip, liberal president who opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It also has military expenditures bigger than those of the next nine most powerful countries combined. So surely it has both the good sense and the clout to see that disaster is averted.

But, no, the U.S. is too beholden to the Israelis, to the Saudis, and to an increasingly Strangelovian foreign-policy establishment at home to act independently.

Foot-Dragger-in-Chief

Barack Obama has long cultivated a Yoda-like air of detachment and inscrutability as hawks tried to push him in an ever more bellicose direction. Yet, despite his administration’s saber rattling, he backed off from bombing Syria in 2013 when Putin arranged for Assad to jettison his chemical-weapons arsenal.

Obama also has refused consistent Turkish demands to open up a no-fly zone in Syria’s north, which would inject the U.S. military directly into the battle to topple Assad’s Baathists. But Obama has let the CIA channel funds to thousands of rebels, many of them Islamists allied with Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s official Syrian affiliate. He has not blocked the Saudis from supplying Al Nusra with U.S.-made high-tech TOW missiles.

The ultimate absurdity occurred two weeks ago when White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest blamed U.S. war hawks for forcing the President to embark on a \$500-million program to teach anti-Assad rebels how to battle Islamic State even though he knew all along that it wouldn’t work. “But I think it’s also time for our critics to ‘fess up in this regard as well,” Earnest said. “They were wrong.”

What was this other than a confession by the Obama administration that it is too weak to say no? It knows that its Syria policy is a disaster, but it is too worried about what the Israelis, Saudis or Washington's neocons might say to embark on anything different.

So the U.S. is unable to apply the brakes either. Ordinarily, the press might be expected to inject a note of reason except that the major media outlets so far seem as confused (or misleading) as anyone. Anne Barnard and Neil MacFarquhar's front-page story in Friday's *New York Times* is typical of the muddled thinking that passes for journalism these days.

Rife with innuendo, it charges that Russia has intervened in Syria in order to embarrass Obama "always a consideration for Mr. Putin" – and predicts that "the glow of early Russian successes will almost certainly fade as the realities of Syria's grim, four-year civil war slowly assert themselves. Mr. Assad's forces are worn down and demoralized, and they are in control of only about 20 percent of Syria's territory."

True enough, although they might have added that if the Syrian military is showing signs of exhaustion, it is because the U.S. and its allies have poured "hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons" into the arms of the opposition, as Vice President Joe Biden let slip in a talk at Harvard's Kennedy School last October.

Barnard and MacFarquhar also report that Assad "is vilified by many in the majority Sunni population," which may also be true, although they might have noted the longstanding campaign by the U.S. and its allies to stir up sectarian hatred in the first place. (Assad is an Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam.)

In a secret 2006 diplomatic cable made public by Wikileaks, for example, then-U.S. Ambassador to Syria William V. Roebuck urged Washington to "play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence" in order to weaken the Assad regime. Although reports that Iranian Shi'ites are proselytizing among poor Sunnis are "often exaggerated," Roebuck said, "[b]oth the local Egyptian and Saudi missions here (as well as prominent Syrian Sunni religious leaders) are giving increasing attention to the matter and we should coordinate more closely with their governments on ways to better publicize and focus regional attention on the issue."

The reports of Shi'ite proselytizing were exaggerated yet Roebuck advised blowing them up all the more.

Prescient Warnings

In August 2012, the Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Salafists, the

Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda all fiercely anti-Shi'ite were the main driving forces behind the anti-Assad rebellion, that they were seeking to establish a "Salafist principality in eastern Syria," and that they were attempting to drum up an anti-Shi'ite jihad among "the rest of the Sunnis in the Arab world," which is "exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition" i.e. the West, the Gulf states, and Turkey "want in order to isolate the Syrian regime."

In his remarks at the Kennedy School last October, Biden that the Gulf states flooded the Syrian rebels with arms and money because "they were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war." Sectarianism didn't just arrive from the sky – rather America and its Gulf allies did their best to nurture and expand it.

Barnard and MacFarquhar go on to say that with Islamic State advancing on Homs and Damascus from the east, "rival insurgents were putting new pressure on the Syrian coastal provinces, where Mr. Assad's support is strongest. The fighters advancing on that front were not from the Islamic State but from the Army of Conquest, a group that includes an affiliate of Al Qaeda known as the Nusra Front and other Islamist groups, including several more secular groups that have been covertly armed and trained by the United States."

In other words, U.S.-backed forces are working hand-in-glove with Al Qaeda as they advance on coastal provinces where Syria's Shi'ite population is concentrated. They might have added that this is a bloodbath in the making that America and its allies are doing everything to foment. But instead they criticize Putin for trying to stop it.

Instead of clearing up the confusion, the press compounds it and hence adds to the danger of a wider conflict. The *Times* is even more hypocritical in its opinion pages. Its lead editorial accuses Putin of "escalat[ing] the bloody conflict" as if the U.S. and its allies had not already ratcheted it up as high as possible and complains that intervention "risks bringing Russia into direct confrontation with the United States," even though Putin is acting at the invitation of the Syrian government while the United States flouts international law by sending in warplanes without Syrian government permission.

"This move by President Vladimir Putin complicates an already chaotic battlefield and will certainly make a political settlement even harder to achieve," the editorial adds. Yet it is the U.S. that has helped prevent a political settlement by demanding that Assad step down as a precondition for any further talks.

The *Times* says that Assad's "hold on power has weakened as the Syrian Army has lost ground not only to the Islamic State, which is trying to establish a

caliphate in Syria and Iraq, but also to a coalition of insurgent groups that is opposed to the Islamic State” without acknowledging that the same groups, as its own journalists report, are also allied with Al Qaeda.

“Mr. Putin could have prevented the turn to violence back in 2011 by persuading his ally not to attack peaceful antigovernment protesters,” the editorial adds. But it is unclear how Putin could have pulled off such a feat since the U.S. failed to prevent its ally Saudi Arabia from sending in troops to crush mass protests the same year in Bahrain or from conducting nightly bombing raids in Yemen that so far this year have killed more than 2,300 civilians.

The *Times* faults Putin for “not try[ing] to work out a plan with the Americans to ensure their respective warplanes would not come in contact,” but then says the United States “rightly rejected a Russian warning after the airstrikes started to avoid Syrian airspace and halt their attacks on the Islamic State.”

It concludes by declaring that “Obama will have to work with America’s partners on a unified response to Russia’s moves and seek a way to end the war,” which means acceding to Saudi vows that support for the rebels “will be intensified.”

The effect is to encourage more of the same mindless confrontationalism that has already plunged Syria into catastrophe. What will Obama do if Russia continues to bomb rebels supported by the U.S. and Saudis? Will he step up military aid or send in jets to chase Russian fighters off? What if U.S. and Russian planes exchange fire? Will he back away from a showdown or allow himself to be maneuvered into a broader conflict?

No one knows. But with the warmongers in control in Washington, the fighting can only spread.

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Giving Saudis a Pass on Yemen War

By supporting Saudi Arabia’s war on Yemen, the U.S. is again finding itself on the same side with Al Qaeda in a Mideast conflict, a troubling pattern driven by a compulsion to excuse actions by U.S. “allies” no matter how outrageous, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The killing earlier this week of at least 131 civilians at a wedding party was only the latest and deadliest event in a campaign of airstrikes in Yemen by a foreign coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) reports that during a six-month period from late March until last week (even before the incident involving the wedding) at least 2,355 civilians had been killed in the fighting in Yemen, with almost two-thirds of the deaths caused by airstrikes conducted by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies.

The same Saudi-led coalition is maintaining a blockade of Yemen's main seaports that has further exacerbated a humanitarian crisis in which, according to UNHCR, four out of five Yemenis require assistance.

This carnage and associated suffering are being largely overlooked and even excused in the United States. In fact, according to official White House statements, the Obama administration is providing "logistical and intelligence support" to the Saudi-led military intervention.

Insufficient attention to what is really going on in Yemen can be partly explained by the distractions of what is going on elsewhere in the Middle East. Most recently this has included the Russian military intervention in Syria, which has received far more attention than the Yemeni war but, especially with this week's Russian airstrikes, is remarkably similar in both nature and purpose to what the Saudis are doing in Yemen.

Another major reason for the inappropriate American attitudes and posture toward what is going on in Yemen is a habit of rigidly thinking of all events especially in the Middle East in terms of a fixed line-up of "allies" and foes, without regard to any consistency in upholding standards of international behavior or to any careful consideration of where U.S. interests do and do not lie.

The single biggest member of this perceived, mind-numbing line-up of foes is Iran, the focus of the politically correct habit of thinking of it as nothing but a foe, and the arch-foe in the region at that. The required ritual references to "nefarious" Iranian activity that is "destabilizing" the Middle East flow off lips so automatically they probably could flow in one's sleep, and are routinely uttered with no reference at all to what Iran actually is or is not doing in the region.

The Iranian connection to the Yemeni conflict is Tehran's sympathy, and some undetermined degree of material support, for the Houthis, who have been one of the most significant and successful players in that multidimensional conflict.

The Houthi movement has been a major player in Yemen for over a decade and has needed no instigation from Iran to assert itself. For the Houthis, who are Zaidi Shiites, the motivations for assertion include concern over the rise of Sunni extremism, including in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as well as longer-standing issues of distribution of political and economic power within Yemen.

Iran's perspective is based partly on sectarian sympathy, although amid a region and a wider Muslim world in which Sunnis outnumber Shiites, Tehran does not have any strong incentive to exacerbate sectarian conflict. Iran tried to dissuade the Houthis from moving against the Yemeni capital Sana, but the Houthis ignored that advice and captured the city anyway. In any event, whatever material aid Iran has given to the Houthis pales in comparison with the direct air, ground and naval role that Saudi Arabia and its allies are playing in Yemen.

The Houthis' activity is only a part of a bigger and more complex set of conflicts in Yemen, a country where no one has ever really controlled the whole thing and that was not even officially a single country until North and South Yemen merged in 1990. Southern resistance to what is seen as northern domination of the merged state has ever since been a major part of Yemeni instability.

The instability of more recent years was initiated not by anything the Houthis did but instead by an Arab Spring-style uprising that pushed out the longstanding president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was replaced by Saleh's former vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, whose claim to legitimacy was an "election" in which he was the only candidate, who himself later became the target of demonstrations for not carrying out promised reforms, and whom the Saudis wound up taking under their wing.

Perhaps the most significant development leading to the current level of violence and suffering in Yemen was the accession to power in Riyadh of King Salman and his young son the defense minister and aspirant to the throne, who decided to use Yemen to make a statement about who's boss in the Arabian Peninsula.

To appreciate the inconsistency in the application in Yemen of standards of international behavior, imagine that Iran had been doing anything like what the Saudis have been doing in Yemen, including using its air force to conduct strikes like the one against the wedding party. The uproar in this country would be deafening, perhaps enough to derail the recently completed nuclear agreement.

There is no good justification for the United States to be identifying itself with, much less materially supporting, the Saudi intervention in Yemen. It is supporting the cause of most of the destruction and suffering in the country,

rather than reducing the destruction and suffering (although the United States is furnishing some humanitarian aid for Yemen).

It is earning opprobrium and resentment for being associated with the Saudi campaign. It is making matters even worse for itself by knuckling under to the Saudi preference to prevent even an impartial United Nations inquiry into wartime excesses by all sides in the Yemeni conflict, including the Houthis.

The United States does not have a direct stake in the internal contests for power and influence in Yemen. Even if it did, it would be hard to explain the side it is taking now. Saleh was considered a U.S. partner during his long time in power, and now he is allied with the Houthis.

The United States does have a stake in how instability in Yemen can reverberate in the form of transnational terrorism and extremism, but again it is on the wrong side. The Houthi movement does not do international terrorism. AQAP certainly does, and it has tried to do it repeatedly against the United States. In the otherwise confused lines of conflict within Yemen, the Houthis and AQAP are each other's clearest enemies.

And the United States certainly does not have a good reason to take sides in sectarian conflicts in Yemen or anywhere else in the Muslim world.

Mistaken policies such as the U.S. posture toward Yemen will continue as long as U.S. policy is made in a domestic political climate in which prevailing sentiment automatically labels some foreign states as "allies" and others as practitioners of "nefarious" behavior, and insists that the United States always align itself with the former and always oppose anything having to do with the latter.

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