

Kicking War Cans Down the Road

Exclusive: By playing along with Official Washington's false hopes and its endless chest-thumping President Obama has trapped himself into a pointless war policy in the Middle East, now deciding to pass America's failing Afghan War onto his successor, notes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Lyndon Johnson, whose record on civil rights, Medicare, the "war on poverty" and the environment made him one of the most progressive leaders in American history, destroyed his legacy by sinking the country ever deeper into the Vietnam War. President Barack Obama risks doing the same by refusing to summon the courage to end America's fruitless and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In October 2011, the White House famously declared, "President Obama has ended the war in Iraq . . . this moment represents more than an accomplishment for the President. It marks a monumental change of focus for our military and a fundamental shift in the way that our nation will engage in the world."

Afghanistan was next on the promised list of ended wars. In January 2014, Obama boasted, "When I took office, nearly 180,000 Americans were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, all our troops are out of Iraq. . . . With Afghan forces now in the lead for their own security, our troops have moved to a support role. Together with our allies, we will complete our mission there by the end of this year, and America's longest war will finally be over."

Instead, Obama is making our longest wars last ever longer. This May, as the corrupt, sectarian government in Baghdad continued to lose ground to the Islamic State, President Obama told Congress that he was extending a "national emergency" because the situation in Iraq continued "to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." Since then he has reintroduced about 3,000 troops to Iraq, about the same number the Kennedy administration had in Vietnam in 1961.

Now President Obama has executed the same reversal in Afghanistan, announcing that he will retain 5,500 combat troops in the country through the end of his second term. Since Taliban forces routed far larger numbers of Afghan troops in the northern city of Kunduz in September, the administration concluded that government forces "are still not as strong as they need to be," in Obama's words. "In key areas of the country the security situation is still very fragile and in some places there's risk of deterioration."

He won't get any argument about that. After more than 14 years and a U.S. investment of more than \$65 billion, the Kabul regime still cannot command reliable support across much of the country. The Taliban now enjoy their greatest reach since 2001. Government forces are suffering record casualties. Rampant corruption, human rights abuses, and resentment toward foreign troops all feed steady Taliban gains.

As the New York Times reported recently, "faith in the government and the warlords who were allied with the government, never strong, has rapidly diminished. Militias and Afghan local police forces installed by the American Special Forces . . . extorted protection money from farmers, and committed rapes and robberies. . . . Over time, as villages threw their lot in with the Taliban, the insurgents' cordon around Kunduz grew tighter. By last year the city felt so under siege that police officers were resistant to driving in a marked government vehicle for fear a Taliban fighter on a motorbike would slap a magnetic bomb on it."

The situation in Afghanistan is frighteningly reminiscent of South Vietnam decades ago: completely untenable. Politicians know it today as they knew it then.

In a May 27, 1964 phone conversation with President Johnson, his dear friend, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, famously warned that sending more troops to Vietnam would "be the most expensive adventure this country ever went into. . . . It doesn't make much sense to do it. . . . We're in the quicksands up to our very neck." Johnson knew it, but said, "I don't see any other way out of it."

Johnson remembered how Republicans had beaten up the Truman administration for "losing" China. To avoid political pain at home, he simply refused to admit defeat abroad. As he told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in November 1963, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."

So, like a gambler who can't bring himself to admit he has a losing hand, Johnson doubled down, costing the lives of countless Indochinese and some 58,000 Americans.

Like Johnson President, Obama publicly claims, without a shred of evidence, that the failure of Afghan government forces "would endanger the security of us all." Behind such rhetoric, his policy is based on the same fundamental premise that guided Johnson: he won't be the first American president to lose a war in Afghanistan or Iraq.

His policy is just as bankrupt in 2015 as Johnson's was in 1965. Obama doesn't

offer any credible plan to win in either country. Unlike Presidents Johnson and Nixon, he doesn't even offer any promises of negotiating an honorable settlement at the peace table. He is simply and transparently kicking the can down the road for his successor.

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, who himself is deeply ambivalent about the wisdom of intervention, noted recently that Obama's ambition to reduce America's military footprint in the world has proven "unthinkable because most Americans are still hard-wired to American exceptionalism, the notion that America is not America if it gives up on spreading liberty.

"So it becomes hard to find a foreign-policy language that's aligned to reality but does not smack of 'declinism', fatal for any politician. Republican bloviating about 'weakling' Obama notwithstanding, any future president will face this foreign-policy dilemma: The distance between America's idea of itself and what it can plausibly achieve is widening."

Doing the right thing is "unthinkable" only because Obama has never made the case to the American public that U.S. security is not fundamentally threatened in either theater, and that no reasonable investment of soldiers or money will change dynamics on the ground. Obama's failure to reframe the issue traps him into taking ownership of both wars and continuing them indefinitely.

His failure comes at a high cost today and in the future. The direct budgetary impact of our ongoing intervention in Afghanistan alone will be at least \$15 billion a year. In addition, U.S. air strikes and night raids will continue killing hundreds of innocent civilians, like the bombing of the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, turning the population ever more against the alien forces in their midst.

President Obama, it must be acknowledged, is simply following the advice pushed on him by the usual bipartisan Establishment suspects, the likes of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, President Bush's National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, and his own former Defense Secretaries Chuck Hagel and Leon Panetta, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Lacking any personal military experience or deep foreign policy background, Obama finds it hard to resist such advice. He made the same mistake when he listened to General David Petraeus and others who sold him on the Afghan "surge." But if 100,000 troops couldn't win the war against the Taliban, 5,500 certainly won't.

Some proponents of continued military intervention claim the aim is no longer victory over the Taliban but continued drone strikes and commando raids against

newly emerging Islamic State and al-Qaeda forces. The reality is that the longer the United States continues intervening in the Islamic world, the more it will continue contributing to the growth of radical, militant Islamists. Left to their own devices, the Taliban are more likely than the United States to be able to suppress such foreign rivals.

President Obama missed the opportunity to cut America's losses early in his first administration, before taking ownership of the wars bequeathed him by President George W. Bush. Now that he is a lame duck, with no electoral challenges facing him, he could do the right thing for the country and his successor by pulling the plug on our failed military interventions and, as promised in 2011, begin a "fundamental shift in the way that our nation will engage in the world."

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US Make-Believe in Syrian War

Official Washington and its mainstream media push deeper and deeper into a Mideast fantasyland where mythical "moderate rebels" in Syria represent a real force rather than a P.R. cover for Sunni jihadists, all the better to bash the Russians for their military offensive, as Gareth Porter explains at Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

The U.S. response to Russia's new Syrian military campaign in support of the Assad regime has struck a pose of moral superiority by arguing that the Russians have not been targeting the Islamic State but rather the non-ISIS Syrian opposition to the Assad regime.

That U.S. response is superficially accurate but deliberately misleading. Although the Russians are not focusing on targets in ISIS-controlled territory, there is a very good reason: it is not ISIS but the forces aligned with al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, Jabhat al-Nusra or al-Nusra Front, that pose the most immediate threat to the very existence of the Assad regime.

In a series of statements on the Russian military campaign, the U.S. Defense Department has hammered the Russians for not targeting ISIS as Moscow initially claimed – later on the Russian rhetoric shifted to “terrorists.” The U.S. statements strongly implied that it was the U.S.-backed “moderate” Syrian groups opposed to the Assad regime that are being attacked.

Major news media have taken the same line in covering the Russian offensive. In an Associated Press story on Oct. 13, for example, reporter Ken Delanian described the CIA as supplying “so-called moderate rebels to oppose Assad” for more than two years, along with its “Arab allies” and that American officials “have watched in recent days as the Russian bombs and missiles have targeted those groups.”

Delanian even quoted Jeffrey White of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), the think tank supporting Israeli interests, who complained that the United States had abandoned its moderate allies. “We’ve aligned ourselves to these guys, we trained them and paid them and sent them off to battle, and when the going gets tough, we’re not there,” said White.

But this framing of the issue fundamentally misrepresents the situation in Syria by conjuring up a non-existent powerful U.S.-backed “moderate” force while diverting attention from the real threat posed by al-Qaeda’s Syrian franchise. The Russians are not hitting some imaginary set of “moderate” Syrian armed groups opposing the Assad regime; they are overwhelmingly focused on targeting the military command in which al-Nusra Front is the central strategic force.

The maps pinpointing the locations of the Russian strikes since Sept. 30 published in various newspapers and on the website of the Institute for Study of War – the original source for the other maps all show very clearly that they are overwhelmingly concentrated in Idlib province, the adjoining Hama province, and areas of Latakia province near Idlib.

But that fact does not take on significance unless it is recalled that the al-Nusra Front – al-Qaeda’s franchise in Syria – and the “Army of Conquest” linked to it, unexpectedly took control of Idlib province in a major military offensive in March.

That victory in Idlib was widely reported at the time to be the biggest turning point in the Syrian war in well over two years and to represent by far the most serious challenge to the Assad regime since the beginning of the war. And although a number of smaller commands were involved in the Idlib offensive, al-Nusra Front’s 3,000 troops represented the majority of the forces involved in the fight. And according to a well-informed source, al-Nusra and its close jihadist ally Ahrar al-Sham accounted for 90 percent of the troops.

We now know, moreover, that the Idlib campaign was the direct result of a policy decision by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with U.S. approval, to support the creation of the “Army of Conquest” and provide it with new military hardware that was a crucial factor in that campaign: the TOW anti-tank missile.

Liz Sly of the Washington Post revealed in a story on Oct. 11 that TOW missiles had been delivered to Syrian armed groups under a program coordinated between the CIA and the Saudis. Sly further notes that the CIA-supplied TOW missiles were so important to rebels who made “gains in northwest Syria” that they have called the missile the “Assad Tamer.”

“It is no accident,” Sly reported, “that the first targets of Russian airstrikes in Syria were the locations where rebels armed with TOW missiles have made the most substantial gain and where they most directly threaten Assad’s hold on power.” That is an obvious reference to the forces that took over Idlib province in March.

But Sly never refers to the “Army of Conquest” victory in Idlib or acknowledges that al-Nusra Front was the main benefactor of the CIA program. Her story quotes a proponent of the program, former U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford, as assuring us that the system prevented the missiles from “falling into extremist hands,” and that he was aware of only two TOW missiles having been obtained by al-Nusra.

Sly reported a very different story in March, however, after the dissolution of Harakat Hazm, the main CIA-supported “moderate rebel group” remaining in the north, following its complete defeat by al-Nusra Front. The victorious al-Nusra announced publicly, according to Sly’s report, that it had seized the TOW anti-tank missiles the CIA had supplied to Harakat Hazm when it occupied the group’s headquarters near Aleppo.

Moreover, the Saudis reportedly had ownership of TOW missiles, and they and the Qataris had already been funneling arms to al-Nusra Front, as Vice-President Joe Biden revealed in October 2014.

It is astonishing that at this late date, anyone in the media could still be seriously suggesting that the CIA somehow managed to turn the “moderate” Syrian rebels into a powerful offensive force threatening the Assad regime in the north. Since the Idlib victory, it is generally understood that the primary threat to drive the Assad regime from power comes from al-Nusra Front and the forces allied with it, and not from the Islamic State – and certainly not the mythical “moderate rebels.”

It is easy to understand why the Obama administration is not interested in talking about the role of al-Nusra in the present Syrian political-military

situation. According to Sly's source, the covert operation to provide the TOW missiles to the Army of Conquest was aimed at putting "sufficient pressure on Assad's forces to persuade him to compromise but not so much that his government would precipitously collapse and leave a dangerous power vacuum."

The Obama administration strategy on Syria assumed a degree of control that is so obviously unrealistic that it was inherently risky to the point of recklessness. That is why no one in the administration or the news media is discussing the reality that the Russian offensive is targeting the biggest jihadist threat to the Assad regime.

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The Reckless Guns of October

Exclusive: With Official Washington's armchair warriors demanding confrontation with Russia over Syria, the prospects for the conflict spinning out of control rise by the day. Years from now, historians may shake their heads over the failure to compromise, cooperate and deescalate, as Daniel Lazare describes.

By Daniel Lazare

Reports that U.S. and Russian warplanes came within 10 to 20 miles of one another just a few seconds at supersonic speeds illustrates how dangerous the military situation in Syria has become. So are calls by Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, for jihadis in the Caucasus to kill Russians in retribution for every Syrian death.

As the conflict continues to escalate, the danger of the fire spreading more broadly rises as well. In a few years, historians looking back on "The Guns of October 2015" might see it as something like this:

Like the Crash of 2008, the military conflict that flamed out of control in the Middle East in late 2015 was one of those events that are understandable in hindsight yet a total surprise when they actually occur. The crisis began several years earlier when Arab Spring protests in Syria provided the opening for a widespread revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalists. But

when President Bashar al-Assad took measures to suppress the revolt, the United States accused him of blocking the legitimate democratic aspirations of his people and demanded that he step down.

This was to be expected since the United States had backed “regime change” in Tunisia and Egypt and in Libya, where NATO war planes provided rebels with the edge they needed to topple long-time dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. But the problem in Syria was that while the Assad government was certainly repressive, the armed opposition was even worse. In the name of democracy, the U.S. thus found itself channeling arms and funds not only to the Muslim Brotherhood, but an array violent Sunni extremists intent on imposing a crushing dictatorship on a diverse religious population.

Increasingly fearful of a “Shi’ite crescent” stretching from Lebanon to Yemen, the arch-Sunnis of Saudi Arabia and other super-rich Arab petro-states also pitched in, flooding the rebels with “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons,” as Vice President Joe Biden later put it, in an effort to promote “a proxy Sunni-Shia war” aimed at toppling Assad’s supposedly Shi’ite-dominated government.

The effect was to send sectarianism to stratospheric heights. In March 2011, the Saudis and United Arab Emirates sent troops into Bahrain to protect the Sunni royal family against widespread protests on the part of the island kingdom’s 70-percent Shi’ite majority. Four years later, the Saudis, along with eight other Sunni Arab states, declared war on Shi’ite Houthi rebels in Yemen, launching nightly air raids and later a ground invasion that, with U.S. technical backing, killed more than 2,300 civilian and rendered millions homeless.

The Arabian Peninsula was ringed with fire as Sunnis clashed with their Shi’ite rivals in a growing number of locales. The Saudis, dependent on an arch-Sunni Wahhabist religious establishment, bore prime responsibility for the debacle. But the U.S. fanned the flames by providing military support for its allies in Riyadh in an effort to rein in Iran, which Washington continued to regard as the prime enemy in the Middle East.

Amid such violence, Russian intervention, beginning on Sept. 30, 2015, had an explosive impact. The initiative drew condemnation from NATO, but widespread support from critics who had long complained that while attacking the terrorist organization known as Al Qaeda in a half-dozen or more countries, the U.S. had remained silent while aid flowed to Al Nusra, Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, and even to ISIS, a splinter group whose penchant for violence was even more extreme.

As even the notoriously blinkered *New York Times* observed, ISIS (also known as

ISIL, Islamic State, and Daesh) continued to draw support from “private donors mainly in Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.” Five years after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton complained in a secret diplomatic memo that that individual Saudis “constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide,” it appeared that the kingdom was still allowing funds to flow to terrorist groups, up to and including Islamic State.

A Full-of-Holes Coalition

So not only was America’s anti-ISIS coalition full of holes, but its efforts to support “moderate” rebels against Islamic State was fallacious since it had long been evident that the various factions cooperated on the battlefield and shared weapons. As one expert put it: “The problem is this kaleidoscopic number of opposition groups that are constantly making deals with each other. Everybody has been associated with Al Qaeda at some point.”

Consequently, Russia’s decision to combat all Syrian rebels ISIS, Al Qaeda and “Free Syrian Army” alike met with applause in many quarters though not in the power corridors of Washington. A humiliated Barack Obama had no choice but to shut down a much-derided \$500-million program to train rebels to fight ISIS, which had generated only a few dozen fighters whom Al Nusra promptly captured or killed.

President Obama might have withdrawn entirely by that point or even opted to join forces with Russia against the fundamentalists. But pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and an increasingly belligerent foreign-policy establishment at home rendered that all but impossible.

With Steve Kroft of the CBS news program “60 Minutes” taunting Obama for showing “weakness” in Syria “He’s challenging your leadership, Mr. President. He’s challenging your leadership,” Kroft said of Russian President Vladimir Putin Obama soon caved. [For more information of Kroft’s extraordinary intervention, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Needling Obama for More Wars.”]

In short order, rebels were enjoying a bumper crop of U.S. military aid, including high-tech TOW missiles, small arms and ammo air-dropped by American cargo planes. “By bombing us, Russia is bombing the thirteen ‘Friends of Syria’ countries,” a jubilant rebel commander said, referring to the U.S. and other nations that had called for Assad’s ouster in 2011. A proxy war between the United States and Russia began to take shape.

Although the White House balked at supplying the rebels with man-portable air-defense systems, pressure mounted from neoconservative politicians and pundits. A CNN op-ed that Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services

Committee and a leading voice on national security issues, wrote on Oct. 13, 2015, was particularly chilling. It called on Obama to inflict severe pain on Russia and Putin regardless of the consequences:

“There is an opportunity here to impose significant costs on an adversary that wants to undercut the United States everywhere. It is an opportunity to weaken an anti-American ruler who will always view us as an enemy. We cannot shy away from confronting Russia in Syria, as Putin expects the administration will do. His intervention has raised the costs and risks of greater U.S. involvement in Syria, but it has not negated the steps we need to take. Indeed, it has made them more imperative.

“We must act now to defend civilian populations and our opposition partners in Syria. As Gen. David Petraeus and others have advocated, we must establish enclaves in Syria where civilians and the moderate opposition to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and ISIS can find greater security. These enclaves must be protected with greater American and coalition airpower and likely foreign troops on the ground. We should not rule out that U.S. forces could play a limited role in this ground contingent. If al-Assad continues to barrel bomb civilians in Syria, we should destroy his air force’s ability to operate.

“We must back up our policy in ways that check Putin’s ambitions and shape his behavior. If Russia attacks our opposition partners, we must impose greater costs on Russia’s interests – for example, by striking significant Syrian leadership or military targets. But we should not confine our response to Syria. We must increase pressure on Russia elsewhere. We should provide defensive weapons and related assistance to Ukrainian forces so they can take a greater toll on Russian forces. And if Putin continues to strike Syrian civilians and our opposition partners, we should ramp up targeted sanctions on Russia. Low energy prices are battering Russia’s economy and currency. We should increase that pain.”

Mounting Saudi-Iran Tensions

This was the logic of ceaseless escalation. A future journalist might have observed that tensions at the same time were mounting dangerously between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Conflict between the two states dated back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which captured the imagination of Muslim militants throughout the world and threatened to expose the Saudis as corrupt and complacent supporters of the status quo.

But the more the Saudis sought to burnish their Muslim credentials by recruiting thousands of *mujahedeen* to battle Soviet “infidels” in Afghanistan and spending tens of billions of dollars to spread their ultra-conservative

brand of Islam, the more the Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry intensified.

"The time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally 'God help the Shia,'" Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan reportedly told Sir Richard Dearlove, head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6, prior to 9/11. "More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them."

Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's long-time foreign minister, remarked to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that "Daesh is our response to your support for the Da'wa," the Shi'ite Islamist party that the 2003 U.S. invasion helped install in Iraq.

ISIS was bad when it threatened the Saudi monarchy, but somewhat less so when it warred against Shi'ism. But 2015 marked a turning point. Once they began bombing Houthi rebels in Yemen in Saudi eyes a cat's paw for the Iranians the Saudis encouraged Wahhabist clerics to denounce their enemy across the Strait of Hormuz in ever more poisonous terms. A day after the war began, for instance, the state news channel granted air time to a radical mullah named Saad bin Ateeq al-Atee to declare that Yemen was meant to be "purely for monotheism," that it "may not be polluted neither by Houthis nor Iranians," and that "we are cleansing the land from these rats."

Iranian officials responded by accusing the Saudis of "follow[ing] the footsteps of Zionist Israel" and predicting that "the House of Saud will fall soon." But the language turned even harsher after the Sept. 24 Mecca stampede, which killed at least 1,453 people, a third of them Iranians.

Amid complaints that Saudi police were rude and indifferent, refusing to allow religious pilgrims, many of them elderly, to leave the area despite extreme heat, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called on Saudi Arabia to apologize to the "Muslim world" for allowing the disaster to take place, promising "a harsh and tough reaction" if the kingdom did not promptly return the bodies of those who had been killed.

Other Iranian leaders were even more incendiary. Instead of diplomacy, President Hassan Rouhani warned that Iran would use "the language of authority" in its dealings with the Saudis. Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, vowed to "make the Saudi dynasty answer for the crimes it committed," adding:

"The Muslim world is tired of the Saudis' betrayals and ignorance including the massacre of the people of Yemen, displacement of the poor people of Syria, repression of the people of Bahrain, ethnic massacres in Iraq, creation of ethnic tension and support of terrorism. The Saudis shall melt in the anger of

the Muslims.”

Mohsen Rezaei, Jafari’s predecessor as head of the Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, warned Riyadh: “Don’t play with fire, because the fire will burn you don’t follow the example of Saddam [Hussein], who in the middle of the Iraq-Iran War had no way out.”

This was tantamount to a declaration of war. Jafari went so far as to compare the Saudis to Abu Lahab, in Islamic lore an uncle of the prophet Muhammad who fought against the Muslim cause. It was the equivalent of the pope calling the head of the Russian Orthodox church a “Judas” or even a “Satan.”

What’s the End Game?

The direction this narrative is heading seems all too clear. One possibility is a clash between Saudi and Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz, a vital oil supply route, a revival in certain respects of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s but with F-15 fighter-bombers in the hands of the Saudis and, on the Iranian side, Shabab-3 missiles.

Admittedly, there are countervailing tendencies. With a 20-percent budget deficit due to a precipitous decline in oil prices, Riyadh is under growing strain. In September 2015, a senior Saudi prince wrote two letters condemning the war in Yemen and calling for King Salman, a hardliner with close ties to the Wahhabist *ulema*, to be removed. Rumors of a palace coup are spreading.

A normal state might pull in its horns as a consequence. But Saudi Arabia is one of the most bizarre political entities in history, a giant kleptocracy governed by super-rich “coupon-clippers,” as do-nothing capitalists were once known.

As a result, its behavior is growing more erratic, which is why some sort of military provocation with Iran is impossible to rule out. For years, the U.S. has encouraged to the gulf states to “recycle” their oil profits for the latest in high-tech weaponry. The Arabs have followed America’s advice all too closely, and now the region seems set to explode.

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