

Hillary Clinton Seeks Neocon Shelter

Special Report: Stunned by falling poll numbers, Hillary Clinton is hoping that Democrats will rally to her neocon-oriented foreign policy and break with Bernie Sanders as insufficiently devoted to Israel. But will that hawkish strategy work this time, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In seeking to put Sen. Bernie Sanders on the defensive over his foreign policy positions, ex-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is embracing a neoconservative stance on the Middle East and gambling that her more hawkish approach will win over Democratic voters.

Losing ground in Iowa and New Hampshire in recent polls, the Clinton campaign has counterattacked against Sanders, targeting his sometimes muddled comments on the Mideast crisis, but Clinton's attack line suggests that Sanders isn't adequately committed to the positions of Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his American neocon acolytes.

Clinton's strategy is to hit Sanders for seeking a gradual normalization of relations with Iran, while Clinton has opted for the neocon position of demonizing Iran and siding with Israel and its quiet alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states that share Israel's animosity toward Shiite-ruled Iran.

By attaching herself to this neocon approach of hyping every conceivable offense by Iran while largely excusing the human rights crimes of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-run states, Clinton is betting that most Democratic voters share the neocon-dominated "group think" of Official Washington: "Iran-our-enemy, Israel/Saudi Arabia-our-friends."

She made similar calculations when she voted for and supported President George W. Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq; when she sided with the neocons in pushing President Barack Obama to escalate the war in Afghanistan; and when she instigated "regime change" in Libya all policies that had dubious and dangerous outcomes. But she seems to still believe that she will benefit politically if she continues siding with the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" side-kicks.

On Thursday, the Clinton campaign put Sanders's suggestion of eventual diplomatic relations with Iran in the context of his lack of ardor toward defending Israel.

"Normal relations with Iran right now?" said Jake Sullivan, the campaign's

senior policy adviser. "President Obama doesn't support that idea. And it's not at all clear why it is that Senator Sanders is suggesting it. Many of you know Iran has pledged the destruction of Israel."

Actually, the Clinton campaign is mischaracterizing Sanders's position as expressed in last Sunday's debate. Sanders opposed immediate diplomatic relations with Tehran.

"Understanding that Iran's behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we're hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable," Sanders said. "Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don't think we should."

Standing with the Establishment

But the Clinton campaign's distortions aside, there is the question of whether or not the Democratic base has begun to reject Official Washington's whatever-Israel-wants orthodoxy.

Hillary Clinton seems to be betting that rank-and-file Democrats remain enthralled to Israel and afraid to challenge the powerful neocon propaganda machine that controls the U.S. establishment's foreign policy by dominating major op-ed pages, TV political chat shows and leading think tanks. The neocons also maintain close ties to the "liberal interventionists" who hold down key jobs in the Obama administration.

Clinton's gamble assumes that progressives and foreign-policy "realists" have failed to develop their own infrastructure for examining and debunking many of the neocon/liberal-hawk propaganda themes and thus any politician who deviates too far from those "group thinks" risks getting marginalized.

In other words, Clinton is counting on the establishment structure holding through Election 2016 despite the populist anger that is evident from the surge of support for democratic socialist Bernie Sanders on the left and for billionaire nativist Donald Trump on the right.

In effect, this election is asking American voters if they want incremental changes to the current system represented by establishment candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush or if they want to shake the system up with insurgent candidates like Sanders and Trump.

Though most neocons are supporting Republican establishment candidates who have sworn allegiance to the Israeli/neocon cause, the likes of Sen. Marco Rubio, some prominent neocons have made clear that they would be happy with Hillary

Clinton as president.

For instance, neocon superstar Robert Kagan told The New York Times in 2014 that he hoped that his neocon views which he now prefers to call “liberal interventionist” would prevail in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. After all, Secretary of State Clinton named Kagan to one of her State Department advisory boards and promoted his wife, neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the provocative “regime change” in Ukraine in 2014.

According to the Times’ article, Clinton “remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes.”

Kagan is quoted as saying: “I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it’s something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.”

Though Clinton recently has sought to portray herself as an Obama loyalist especially in South Carolina where she is counting on strong African-American support she actually has adopted far more hawkish positions than the President, both when she was a senator and as Obama’s first secretary of state.

‘Team of Rivals’ Debacle

Arguably, Obama’s most fateful decision of his presidency occurred shortly after the 2008 election when he opted for the trendy idea of a “team of rivals” to run his foreign policy. He left Bush family loyalist Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, retained a neocon-dominated senior officer corps led by the likes of Gen. David Petraeus, and picked hawkish Sen. Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State. Thus, Obama never took control of his own foreign policy.

The troika of Clinton-Gates-Petraeus challenged Obama over his desire to wind down the Afghan War, bureaucratically mouse-trapping him into an ill-advised “surge” that accomplished little other than getting another 1,750 U.S. soldiers killed along with many more Afghans. Nearly three-quarters of the 2,380 U.S. soldiers who died in Afghanistan were killed on Obama’s watch.

Ironically, it was Gates who shed the most light on Clinton’s neocon-oriented positions in his memoir, *Duty*, written after he left the Pentagon in 2011. While generally flattering Clinton for her like-minded positions, Gates also portrays Clinton as a pedestrian foreign policy thinker who is easily duped and leans toward military solutions.

Indeed, for thoughtful and/or progressive Democrats, the prospect of a President

Hillary Clinton could represent a step back from some of President Barack Obama's more innovative foreign policy strategies, particularly his readiness to cooperate with the Russians and Iranians to defuse Middle East tensions and his willingness to face down the Israel Lobby when it is pushing for heightened confrontations and war.

Based on her public record and Gates's insider account, Clinton could be expected to favor a neoconservative approach to the Mideast, one more in line with the dominant thinking of Official Washington and the belligerent dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Standing with Israeli Bigots

As a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State, Clinton rarely challenged the conventional wisdom on the Mideast or resisted the use of military force to solve problems. She famously voted for the Iraq War in 2002 falling for President George W. Bush's bogus WMD case and remained a war supporter until her position became politically untenable during Campaign 2008.

Representing New York, Clinton avoided criticizing Israeli actions. In summer 2006, as Israeli warplanes pounded southern Lebanon, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese, Sen. Clinton shared a stage with Israel's bigoted Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman who had said, "While it may be true and probably is that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim."

At a pro-Israel rally with Clinton in New York on July 17, 2006, Gillerman proudly defended Israel's massive violence against targets in Lebanon. "Let us finish the job," Gillerman told the crowd. "We will excise the cancer in Lebanon" and "cut off the fingers" of Hezbollah.

Responding to international concerns that Israel was using "disproportionate" force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, "You're damn right we are." [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Sen. Clinton did not protest Gillerman's remarks, since doing so would presumably have offended an important pro-Israel constituency, which she has continued to cultivate.

In November 2006, when President Bush nominated Gates to be Defense Secretary, Clinton gullibly misread the significance of the move. She interpreted it as a signal that the Iraq War was being wound down when it actually presaged the opposite, that an escalation or "surge" was coming.

From her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Clinton failed to

penetrate the smokescreen around Gates's selection. The reality was that Bush had ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in part, because he had sided with Generals John Abizaid and George Casey who favored shrinking the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Gates was privately onboard for replacing those generals and expanding the U.S. footprint.

On with the Surge

After getting blindsided by Gates over what became a "surge" of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, Sen. Clinton sided with Democrats who objected to the escalation, but Gates quotes her in his memoir as later telling President Obama that she did so only for political reasons.

Gates recalled a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009, to discuss whether to authorize a similar "surge" in Afghanistan, a position favored by both Defense Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Clinton, who supported an even higher number of troops than Gates did. But the Afghan "surge" faced skepticism from Vice President Joe Biden and other White House staffers.

Gates wrote that he and Clinton "were the only outsiders in the session, considerably outnumbered by White House insiders. Obama said at the outset to Hillary and me, 'It's time to lay our cards on the table, Bob, what do you think?' I repeated a number of the main points I had made in my memo to him [urging three brigades].

"Hillary agreed with my overall proposal but urged the president to consider approving the fourth brigade combat team if the allies wouldn't come up with the troops."

In *Duty*, Gates cited his collaboration with Clinton as crucial to his success in getting Obama to agree to the Afghan troop escalation and the expanded goal of counterinsurgency. Referring to Clinton, Gates wrote, "we would develop a very strong partnership, in part because it turned out we agreed on almost every important issue."

The hawkish Gates-Clinton tandem helped counter the more dovish team including Vice President Biden, several members of the National Security Council staff and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who tried to steer President Obama away from this deeper involvement.

Gates wrote, "I was confident that Hillary and I would be able to work closely together. Indeed, before too long, commentators were observing that in an administration where all power and decision making were gravitating to the White House, Clinton and I represented the only independent 'power center,' not least because, for very different reasons, we were both seen as 'un-fireable.'"

Political Expediency

Gates also reported on what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing: "The exchange that followed was remarkable. In strongly supporting the surge in Afghanistan, Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, 'The Iraq surge worked.'

"The president conceded vaguely that opposition to the Iraq surge had been political. To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying." (Obama's aides disputed Gates's suggestion that the President indicated that his opposition to the Iraq "surge" was political, noting that he had always opposed the Iraq War. The Clinton team did not challenge Gates's account.)

But the exchange, as recounted by Gates, indicates that Clinton not only let her political needs dictate her position on an important national security issue, but that she accepts as true the superficial conventional wisdom about the "successful surge" in Iraq.

While that is indeed Official Washington's beloved interpretation in part because influential neocons believe the "surge" rehabilitated their standing after the WMD fiasco and the disastrous Iraq War the reality is that the Iraq "surge" never achieved its stated goal of buying time to reconcile the country's sectarian divides, which remain bloody to this day and helped create the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State, which began as "Al Qaeda in Iraq."

The truth that Hillary Clinton apparently doesn't recognize is that the "surge" was only "successful" in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until President Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame for the failure could be shifted, at least partly, to President Obama.

Other than sparing "war president" Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed almost one-quarter of the war's total U.S. deaths along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks's "Collateral Murder." video depicted one 2007 scene during the "surge" in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then killed a Good Samaritan, when he stopped his van to take survivors to a hospital, and severely wounded two children in the van.

The Unsuccessful Surge

A more rigorous analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 apparently beyond Hillary Clinton's abilities or inclination would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the "surge" and were implemented in 2006 by Generals Casey and Abizaid.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key Al Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward Al Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called "Awakening" in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the "surge" or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military's occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on and got a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush's early war judgments, concluded that the "surge" was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence.

In his book, *The War Within*, Woodward wrote, "In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge."

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of Al Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remained very influential, the myth

grew that Bush's "surge" had brought the violence under control. Gen. Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved "victory at last" in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Buying Fallacies

Even the inconvenient truths that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 and that Iraq's Shiite-Sunni divide widened into a chasm that has since spread divisions into Syria and even into Europe did not dent the cherished conventional wisdom about the "successful surge."

Yet, it is one thing for neocon pundits to promote such fallacies; it is another thing for the alleged Democratic front-runner for President in 2016 to believe this nonsense. And to say that she only opposed the "surge" out of a political calculation could border on disqualifying.

But the pattern fits with Clinton's previous decisions. She belatedly broke with the Iraq War during Campaign 2008 only when she realized that her hawkish stance was damaging her political chances against Obama, who had opposed the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Yet, as Secretary of State, Clinton sought to purge officials seen as insufficiently hawkish. After Obama hesitantly approved the Afghan "surge" and reportedly immediately regretted his decision Clinton took aim at Eikenberry, a retired general who had served in Afghanistan before being named ambassador.

Pressing for his removal, "Hillary had come to the meeting loaded for bear," Gates wrote. "She gave a number of specific examples of Eikenberry's insubordination to herself and her deputy. She said, 'He's a huge problem.'

"She went after the NSS [national security staff] and the White House staff, expressing anger at their direct dealings with Eikenberry and offering a number of examples of what she termed their arrogance, their efforts to control the civilian side of the war effort, their refusal to accommodate requests for meetings.

"As she talked, she became more forceful. 'I've had it,' she said, 'You want it [control of the civilian side of the war], I'll turn it all over to you and wash my hands of it. I'll not be held accountable for something I cannot manage because of White House and NSS interference.'"

However, when the protests failed to get Eikenberry and General Douglas Lute, a deputy national security adviser, fired, Gates concluded that they had the protection of President Obama and reflected his doubts about the Afghan War

policy:

“It had become clear that Eikenberry and Lute, whatever their shortcomings, were under an umbrella of protection at the White House. With Hillary and me so adamant that the two should leave, that protection could come only from the president.”

The Libya Fiasco

In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton also was a hawk on military intervention in Libya to oust (and ultimately kill) Muammar Gaddafi. However, on Libya, Defense Secretary Gates sided with the doves, feeling that the U.S. military was already overextended in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and another intervention risked further alienating the Muslim world.

This time, Gates found himself lined up with Biden “urging caution,” while Clinton joined with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and NSC aides Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power in “urging aggressive U.S. action to prevent an anticipated massacre of the rebels as Qaddafi fought to remain in power,” Gates wrote. “In the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary threw her considerable clout behind Rice, Rhodes and Power.”

President Obama again ceded to Clinton’s advocacy for war and supported a Western bombing campaign that enabled the rebels, including Islamic extremists with ties to Al Qaeda, to seize control of Tripoli and hunt down Gaddafi, who was tortured and executed on Oct. 20, 2011.

Clinton expressed, delight when she received the news of Gaddafi’s murder. “We came. We saw. He died,” she chortled, paraphrasing Julius Caesar’s boast after a victory by Imperial Rome.

After Clinton’s “victory,” Libya became a major source for regional instability, including an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel, an incident that Clinton has called the worst moment in her four years as Secretary of State. The Islamic State also gained a foothold inside Libya, chopping off the heads of Coptic Christians.

Gates retired from the Pentagon on July 1, 2011; Petraeus resigned as CIA director on Nov. 9, 2012, amid a sex-and-secrets scandal; and Clinton stepped down at the State Department on Feb. 1, 2013, after Obama’s reelection.

In 2013, with Clinton gone, Obama charted a more innovative foreign policy course, collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on Syria and Iran, rather than seeking military

solutions. In both cases, Obama had to face down hawkish sentiments in his own administration and in Congress, as well as Israeli and Saudi opposition.

But the neocon empire struck back in 2014, with Assistant Secretary Nuland orchestrating a “regime change” in Ukraine on Russia’s border and with the neocon-dominated opinion circles of Official Washington placing the blame for the Ukraine crisis on President Putin’s “aggression.”

Faced with this new “group think” and still influenced by liberal interventionist advisers such as Susan Rice and Samantha Power Obama joined the chorus of hate-talk against Putin, ratcheting up tensions with Russia and agreeing to escalate covert U.S. support for Syrian rebels seeking the long-held neocon goal of “regime change” in Syria.

However, Obama continued to collaborate behind the scenes with Russia to achieve an agreement to constrain Iran’s nuclear program – to the dismay of the neocons who wanted instead to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran on their way to seeking another “regime change.”

Bashing Iran

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton was a hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue. In 2009-2010, when Iran first indicated a willingness to compromise, she led the opposition to any negotiated settlement and pushed for punishing sanctions.

To clear the route for sanctions, Clinton helped sink agreements tentatively negotiated with Iran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium out of the country. In 2009, Iran was refining uranium only to the level of about 3-4 percent, as needed for energy production. Its negotiators offered to swap much of that for nuclear isotopes for medical research.

But the Obama administration and the West rebuffed the Iranian gesture because it would have left Iran with enough enriched uranium to theoretically refine much higher up to 90 percent for potential use in a single bomb, though Iran insisted it had no such intention and U.S. intelligence agencies agreed.

Then, in spring 2010, Iran accepted another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. But that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary Clinton and was derided by leading U.S. news outlets, including editorial writers at the New York Times who mocked Brazil and Turkey as being “played by Tehran.”

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey as bumbling understudies on the world stage continued even after Brazil released Obama’s private letter to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal.

Despite the letter's release, Obama didn't publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal, another moment when Clinton and administration hardliners got their way.

That set the world on the course for tightened economic sanctions on Iran and heightened tensions that brought the region close to another war. As Israel threatened to attack, Iran expanded its nuclear capabilities by increasing enrichment to 20 percent to fill its research needs, moving closer to the level necessary for building a bomb.

Clinton's Course

Ironically, the nuclear deal reached in late 2013 and solidified in 2015 essentially accepts Iran's low-enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes, pretty much where matters stood in 2009-2010. But the Israel Lobby quickly set to work, again, trying to torpedo the new Iran agreements by getting Congress to approve new sanctions on Iran.

Clinton remained noncommittal for several weeks as momentum for the sanctions bill grew, but she finally declared her support for President Obama's opposition to the new sanctions. In a Jan. 26, 2014 letter to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, she wrote:

"Now that serious negotiations are finally under way, we should do everything we can to test whether they can advance a permanent solution. As President Obama said, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed, while keeping all options on the table. The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that imposing new unilateral sanctions now 'would undermine the prospects for a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran.' I share that view."

One key question for a Clinton presidential candidacy has been whether she would build on the diplomatic foundation that Obama has laid regarding Iran and Russia, or dismantle it and return to a neocon foreign policy focused on "regime change" and catering to the views of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In her campaign's latest comments, Hillary Clinton has made clear that she has little interest in deviating further from the Israeli-neocon prescribed hostility toward Iran by letting her campaign accuse Sanders of softness on Tehran.

So, with her once-solid polls numbers softening, she has decided to appeal to hawkish Democrats and the muscular support of the Israel Lobby to help her fend off the Sanders surge.

Clinton is rolling the dice in the belief that most Democrats won't think

through the fallacious “group thinks” of Official Washington or will at least be scared and confused enough to steer away from Sanders. That way, Clinton believes she can still win the nomination.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Neocons Flack for Unsavory Saudis

Exclusive: Since Israel decided that Iran was its big enemy “[and made Saudi Arabia its quiet ally](#)” American neocons have fallen in line, demanding that the U.S. government punish Iran and coddle the Saudis whatever their unsavory behavior, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Bret Stephens, the deputy editorial page editor who writes *The Wall Street Journal’s* weekly “Global View” column, is not really a bad prose stylist, and his logic is not always unsound. But his unexamined assumptions lead him astray.

His latest [installment](#) is typical. Entitled “Why the U.S. Should Stand by the Saudis Against Iran,” it begins with not one premise, but two. The first, as the title suggest, is that the U.S. should stand by Riyadh in its time of woes. The second is that if the kingdom stumbles, only one person is to blame, President Obama.

The article opens on a promising note: “There is so much to detest about Saudi Arabia,” Stephens writes. It bans women from driving, it shuts its doors to Syrian refugees, it promotes “a bigoted and brutal version of Sunni Islam,” and it has “increased tensions with Iran by executing a prominent radical Shiite cleric, i.e., Nimr al-Nimr.”

So why continue siding with a kingdom “that Israeli diplomat Dore Gold once called ‘Hatred’s Kingdom,’” Stephens asks, “especially when the administration is also trying to pursue further opening [sic] with Tehran?”

It’s a question that a lot of people are asking especially now that the collapse in oil prices means that the Saudis are less economically important than they once were. But Stephens says it would be wrong to abandon the kingdom

“especially when it is under increasing economic strain from falling oil prices.”□

Get that? It would be wrong to abandon the kingdom when oil is scarce and prices are high – because that’s when we need the Saudis the most – and it’s wrong to abandon the monarchy when oil is plentiful and prices are low when we need them the least. Oil, in other words, has nothing to do with it. It’s wrong because it’s wrong.

But Stephens thinks it’s wrong for another reason as well: because Saudi Arabia “feels acutely threatened by a resurgent Iran.” Why is Iran resurgent? Because the nuclear deal that it recently concluded with the U.S. has set it free from punishing economic sanctions.

He then goes on to list all the bad things Iran has done thanks to the power that the Obama administration has just handed it on a silver platter.”Despite fond White House hopes that the nuclear deal would moderate Iran’s behavior,” Stephens says, “Tehran hard-liners wasted no time this week disqualifying thousands of moderate candidates from running in next month’s parliamentary elections, and an Iranian-backed militia appears to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of three Americans in Iraq.”□

Loaded Dice

Scary, eh? Yes, until one considers how Stephens has loaded the dice. His statement about Iran’s hardliners is accurate as far as it goes. But he might have pointed out that while Iran’s theocratic rulers certainly hobble democracy, they at least allow some sort of parliamentary elections to take place whereas Saudi Arabia, the regime he is now leaping to defend, allows exactly none. (Sorry, but last month’s meaningless municipal-council elections don’t count.)

In the Saudi kingdom, political parties, protests, even seminars in which intellectuals get to sound off are all *verboten*. Since March 2014, Saudis have been expressly forbidden to do anything that might undermine the status quo, including advocating atheism, criticizing Islam, participating in any form of political protest, or even joining a political party.

Stephens’s statement about the three kidnapped Americans is equally misleading. While Iran does indeed back such militias, Reuters cited U.S. government sources saying that “Washington had no reason to believe Tehran was involved in the kidnapping and did not believe the trio were being held in Iran.”□

Plus, to follow Stephens’s logic, if Iran is responsible for specific actions like these, then Saudi Arabia is responsible for specific actions of the Sunni Salafist forces that it funds in Syria, which include lopping off the heads of

Shi'ites and committing many other such atrocities.

Stephens says that the U.S.-Iranian accord "guarantees Iran a \$100 billion sanctions windfall," a figure that the Council on Foreign Relations, no slouch when it comes to Iran bashing, describes as roughly double the true amount. He says Iran now enjoys "the protection of a major nuclear power" thanks to Russia's intervention in Syria and agreement to supply Tehran with high-tech weaponry.

As a result, "Iranian proxies are active in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and dominate much of southern Iraq. Restive Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain provide further openings for Iranian subversion on the Arabian peninsula."□

Possibly so, except that Stephens might have noted that Saudi proxies, up to and including Al Qaeda, are active in the same countries and that Shi'ites in Bahrain and the Eastern Province might be a little less restive if Saudi repression were a little less savage.

Obama's Fault

Then Stephens gets to his main point, which is the nefarious role of Obama:

"Add to this an American president who is ambivalent about the House of Saud the way Jimmy Carter was about the Shah of Iran, and no wonder Riyadh is acting the way it is. If the administration is now unhappy about the Saudi war in Yemen or its execution of Shiite radicals, it has only itself to blame.

"All this means that the right U.S. policy toward the Saudis is to hold them close and demonstrate serious support, lest they be tempted to continue freelancing their foreign policy in ways we might not like. It won't happen in this administration, but a serious commitment to overthrow the Assad regime would be the place to start."

In other words, if the Saudi monarchy chops off the heads of dissident Shi'ites and sentences liberal blogger Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes, it's because Obama doesn't show enough love. Ditto Yemen. If Saudi air raids have killed some 2,800 civilians according to the latest UN estimates, including more than 500 children, it's because Obama has allowed his affections to flag for the Saudi royals. If only he would hug the Saudi princes a little closer, they wouldn't feel so lonely and bereft and would therefore respond more gently to their neighbors in the south. No blame should be cast on the Saudi leaders. Their behavior can't be blamed on the contradictions between their playboy lifestyles and the ascetic extremes of Wahhabism or the baleful effects of raking in untold oil riches while doing no work in return. No, everything's the fault of Obama

and his yuppie ways.

What can one say about reasoning like this? Only that it makes Donald Trump and Ted Cruz seem like paragons of mental stability. But given that *The Wall Street Journal* has long filled its editorial pages with such swamp gas, why dwell on the feverish exhalations of just one right-wing columnist?

The answer is that Stephens speaks not just for himself, but for an entire neocon establishment that is beside itself over the mess in the Persian Gulf and desperate to avoid blame for the chaos (which is now spreading into Europe). So, talking points must be developed to shift responsibility.

The Lost Saudi Cause

But the Saudis may be beyond saving. With Iran preparing to put a million more barrels on the world oil market per day, prices, down better than 75 percent since mid-2014, can only go lower. The Saudis, hemorrhaging money at the rate of \$100 billion a year, know that when the foreign currency runs out, their power runs out too. Hence, they fear winding up as yet another failed Middle Eastern state like Syria.

“Islamic State and other jihadist groups would flourish,” Stephens observes, this time correctly. “Iran would seek to extend its reach in the Arabian peninsula. The kingdom’s plentiful stores of advanced Western military equipment would also fall into dangerous hands.”

It’s not a pretty picture, which is why the neocons are pointing the fingers at others, Obama first and foremost. As Jim Lobe recently observed, all the usual suspects are pitching in in behalf of their Saudi friends, Elliott Abrams, Bill Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and so on. All are furious at what Obama administration has done to their beloved petro-sheiks.

As neocon theorist Max Book put it at the *Commentary Magazine* website: “The American policy should be clear: We should stand with the Saudis, and the Egyptians, and the Jordanians, and the Emiratis, and the Turks, and the Israelis [sic], and all of our other allies, to stop the new Persian Empire. But the Obama administration, morally and strategically confused, is instead coddling Iran in the vain hope that it will somehow turn Tehran from enemy into friend.”

Something else is also at work, however, the I-word. As Lobe notes, neocons have done an about-face with regard to the Saudis. Where Richard Perle once called on the Bush administration to include Riyadh on his post-9/11 hit list, the neocons are now firmly on the Saudis’ side.

Why? The reason is Israel, which has decided since tangling with Hezbollah in

the 2006 Lebanon War that the Shi'ites are its chief enemy and the Sunni petro-monarchies, comparatively speaking, its friend. Like Communists responding to the latest directive from Moscow, the neocons have turned on a dime as a consequence, churning out reams of propaganda in support of Arab countries they once loathed.

A Saudi Makeover

In the neocon domain, Saudi Arabia has undergone a wondrous makeover, transformed from a bastion of reaction and anti-Semitism to a country that is somehow peace-loving and progressive. Formerly an enemy of Washington, or at best a distasteful gang of business associates supplying lots of oil and buying lots of guns, Saudi Arabia has been re-invented as America's dearest friend in the Arab world.

People like Bret Stephens have done their bit in behalf of the cause, turning out article after article whose real purpose is hidden from view. Where neocons formerly scorned anyone who spoke well of the Saudis, they now denounce anyone who speaks ill.

The funny thing is that Obama *is* to blame for the disaster in the Middle East, not because he disregarded the latest *diktat* from the Washington neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment, but because he has accepted its priorities all too dutifully. He stood by as Qatar steered hundreds of millions of dollars to Salafist jihadis in Libya and while the Saudis, Qataris, and other Gulf states did the same to Sunni fundamentalists in Syria.

Obama's response to Saudi Arabia's repression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain was muted, he refused to condemn the beheading of al-Nimr – the best the State Department could come up with was a statement declaring that the execution risked “exacerbating sectarian tensions at a time when they urgently need to be reduced” – and Obama has even given military support to the kingdom's air assault on Yemen.

Yet now the neocons blame him for not doing enough to keep the Saudis happy.

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