US Bows to Israeli/Saudi Alliance in Blaming Iran

Exclusive: Contrary to common belief, Israel supported Iran’s Islamic Republic for more than a decade in the 1980s before shifting its favors to Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and making sure the U.S. followed suit, recalls Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

At first, American officials couldn’t believe it. In 1993, the Israelis began pressuring the Clinton administration to view Iran as the greatest global threat. Only a short time earlier, in the 1980s, Israel had been cooperating with the Iranians militarily and selling them weapons to fight Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War.

Back then, the Israelis were Iran’s best lobbyists in Washington, pushing the Reagan administration to talk to Iran, to sell arms to Iran, and even to ignore Iran’s tough talk on Israel. In that process, Israel was aided by a group of staunchly pro-Israeli officials within the Reagan administration whom we now know as the neoconservatives.

In 1981, just months after Iran had held 52 American diplomatic personnel hostage for 444 days, senior State Department officials Robert McFarlane and Paul Wolfowitz were advocating on behalf of the Israeli desire to sell Iran weapons. That initiative, which was continued by McFarlane when he became President Reagan’s National Security Advisor, ultimately led to the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986 when Reagan’s secret approval of U.S. arms shipments to Iran became public.

Yet, even in the wake of that scandal and the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the neoconservatives who remained influential under Reagan’s successor, President George H.W. Bush, pressed ahead with the goal of getting the U.S. to warm its relations with Iran. Iraq’s defeat at the hands of the U.S. military and its allies in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 further reduced the Arab threat to Israel’s security and encouraged more thinking about a possible U.S.-Iranian détente.

The Bush-I administration’s 1991 “National Security Strategy of the United States” said the U.S. was open to “an improved relationship with Iran,” a country that a 1991 National Intelligence Estimate said was “turning away from revolutionary excesses . . . toward more conventional behavior.”

However, in 1993, with the Clinton administration in power, the Israelis changed
their tune, urging the U.S. government to find Iran lurking behind every terrorist attack, every conflict and every threat.

There appear to have been several factors leading to this Israeli switch – from the fact that the Cold War was over and thus Arab states that had relied on Soviet weaponry were weakened; that Iran-backed Hezbollah was challenging Israel’s military occupation of southern Lebanon; and that Israel could no longer profit from Iran’s desperate need for weapons (with the war with Iraq over and Iran’s treasury depleted) while the Arab oil states offered a more lucrative opportunity for both geopolitical and financial gain.

**Hooked on the Money**

Israeli leadership had found the billions of dollars from arms sales to Iran useful in maintaining Israel’s large military/intelligence infrastructure as well as Israel’s development of Jewish settlements inside Palestinian territories on the West Bank. With that cash source gone, Israel began recalculating its longstanding Periphery Strategy, which had called for countering Arab pressure from close-in states by cultivating relations with non-Arab regional powers on the periphery, such as Iran and Turkey.

There were also two other seismic events that altered the geopolitical landscape. The Cold War was over and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had been humiliated in the Persian Gulf War. While the Israelis saw both events as positive, there were unintended consequences. The end of the Cold War meant the exit of the Soviet Union from the Middle East: that left Israel’s traditional Arab enemies even more enfeebled and the U.S. government less worried about losing influence in the oil-rich region. Iran also emerged as relatively stronger than Iraq due to Iraq’s failed invasion of Iran and its catastrophic defeat after its invasion of Kuwait.

Israel’s 1992 elections also brought Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and the Labor Party to power, raising the possibility of finally reaching a peace accord with the Palestinians and thus the possibility of more normalized relations with the Arab world. In turn, that raised the potential for more lucrative arrangements with oil-rich sheikdoms by, in effect, renting out the Israel Lobby to the Sunni-ruled Gulf states so they could push their historic conflict with the Shiites whose power base was Iran.

“There was a feeling in Israel that because of the end of the Cold War, relations with the U.S. were cooling and we needed some new glue for the alliance,” Efraim Inbar of the Begin-Sadat Center told Trita Parsi. “And the new glue was radical Islam.”
But it was a very selective kind of radical Islam: not the kind Saudi Arabia was financing and exporting through Wahhabi fundamentalism and violent jihadists like those in Al Qaeda, but Iran’s radical Shiite Islam. Selling Iran as the number one global terror threat gave birth to a new Middle East enemy that replaced the Soviet Union and reinflated Israel’s value to the U.S. in the region. “Iran,” Inbar went on to explain, “was radical Islam.”

**A New Alliance**

For the first time, an alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States became possible with Iran as the designated enemy. The Israeli-Saudi relationship has evolved mostly in secret over the past couple of decades but has popped into view in recent years as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his inner circle have emphasized the common interests – especially animosity toward Iran – that they share with Saudi Arabia.

Netanyahu has recently referred to this Israeli-Saudi alliance when he said that Iran was driving Israel into cooperative arrangements with what he called “the modern Sunni states.” He referred to “a new alliance between Israel and Islamic states. … The good news is that the other guys are getting together with Israel as never before. It is something that I would have never expected in my lifetime.”

Nine months ago, Netanyahu delivered the same message when he said “for the first time in my lifetime, and for the first time in the life of my country, Arab countries in the region do not see Israel as an enemy, but, increasingly, as an ally.”

Though the Israeli-Saudi relationship is rarely spoken of out loud, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz admitted recently that Israel “has ties that are ... partly covert with many Muslim and Arab countries.” Saudi Arabia was the only one he specifically named. According to Reuters, he said those ties are fueled by “common concerns over Iran.”

But there are other foundations for this relationship. For years, Saudi Arabia sought to buy influence in Washington’s policy circles regarding the Middle East but was largely unsuccessful because Israel had cornered that market and Israel’s influential American supporters demonized lobbyists, academics and others who took Saudi money. Eventually, it became clear to Saudi Arabia that it made more sense to rent out Israel’s sophisticated lobbying apparatus rather than to fight it.

Investigative journalist Robert Parry reported that Saudi money helped seal this Israel-Saudi alliance, with the Saudis giving Israel billions of dollars and
Israel reciprocating by giving Saudi Arabia added influence in Washington.

But Official Washington was surprised in the 1990s when Israel’s turnabout began — and Iran went from being a misunderstood nation tilting toward moderation to the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism. Despite some bewilderment, U.S. policymakers soon readjusted their rhetoric as the legendary Israeli influence operations carried the day. Shiite Iran became the new terror threat, even after the 9/11 attacks that were organized by Al Qaeda, a Sunni fundamentalist group associated with Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic State

The gap between the facts on the ground — the recognition that Al Qaeda and Islamic State remain the real chief terror threats from radical Islam — and the propaganda of principally blaming Iran for terrorism has led to a quandary for U.S./Israeli propagandists. They want to focus Americans’ fury on Iran and its allies, Syria and Hezbollah, but it is Saudi-and-Gulf-connected terror groups, such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, that were chopping off heads of innocents and sponsoring terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Europe.

That disconnected reality explains why America’s response to the emergence of the Islamic State can best be characterized as confused and bizarre. Though the Obama administration claimed it was taken by surprise by the Islamic State’s emergence in Iraq and Syria, it really wasn’t. Rather, policymakers had sought to persuade the American public on the need for a “regime change” conflict in Syria, an Iranian ally. This strategy went back years.

A WikiLeaks-released cable dated Dec. 13, 2006, and written by the charge d’affaires of the U.S. embassy in Damascus to the Secretary of State recommended that the U.S. “coordinate more closely with” Egypt and Saudi Arabia in a policy to weaken President Bashar al-Assad’s government in Syria and “to play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence.” The cable also recognized that Islamist extremists were “certainly a long-term threat” to the Syrian government.

Over the years, there was little change in this inconvenient truth that jihadists were playing a crucial role in achieving these geopolitical goals. For instance, in a December 2009 cable, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that “Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban . . . and other terrorist groups.”

By Aug. 12, 2012, the U.S. government knew explicitly that Islamic extremists were the engine in the Syrian insurgency. A classified Defense Intelligence Agency Information Intelligence Report unambiguously declares that “The salafist [sic], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq, later ISIS and the
Islamic State] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria.”

Section 8.C. of the report astonishingly predicts that “If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared salafist principality in eastern Syria.” Section 8.D.1. of the report goes on specifically to say that “ISI could also declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria.”

So, the U.S. government knew that the Islamic extremists drove the Syrian insurgency that Washington and its regional allies were supporting. U.S. intelligence analysts also had a surprisingly good idea what the possible outcome of that support was.

Yet, to advance the regional goals of the Israeli-Saudi tandem – i.e., the overthrow of the Syrian government because of its ties to Iran – the U.S. government was, in effect, supporting the very terrorists the war on terror was meant to eradicate.

**Selling Al Qaeda**

At times, senior Israeli officials made clear their preferences for Sunni extremists over more moderate Arabs associated with Shiite-ruled Iran. For instance, in September 2013, then-Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Syria’s largely secular President Bashar al-Assad.

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

Oren reiterated this position in June 2014 at an Aspen Institute conference. Speaking as a former ambassador, Oren said Israel would even prefer a victory by the Islamic State, which was then massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria.

“From Israel’s perspective, if there’s got to be an evil that’s got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail,” said Oren, who is now a member of the Knesset and part of Netanyahu’s government.

Other senior Israelis have expressed similar sentiments. Sima Shine, who is in charge of Iran for Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs, urged Assad’s removal
even if that might turn Syria over to extremists. “The ‘devil we know’ is worse than the devil we don’t,” she said in June 2013. “If Bashar remains in power, that would be a huge achievement for Iran.”

So, in 2014, when Islamic State jihadists advanced through Syria and Iraq and knocked on the door of Lebanon, their success should not have come as a surprise to President Obama and other U.S. policymakers. Today’s Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have in common that they are Iran’s three principal allies in the region.

In other words, the Islamic State’s interests largely corresponded to those of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.: isolating and weakening Iran. Only the Islamic State’s shocking excesses of videotaped beheadings of Americans and other captives – as well as its military successes inside Iraq – forced President Obama’s hand in committing U.S. forces to stop the Islamic State onslaught.

**Obsessed with Assad**

Still, America has long been bent on removing Assad from Syria. The coincidence of Islamic State and American interests in this regard is revealed in section 8.C of the DIA report: “there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

So, the Islamic State’s advance into this region was consistent with American (and more to the point, Israeli and Saudi) interests because these Sunni extremists would block the supply lines from Iran to Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Thus, initially at least, the U.S. government acquiesced to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front taking the lead in damaging or destroying Iran’s allies in Syria.

And Iran suspected as much. According to Iran expert Trita Parsi, the Iranians believed that the initial relaxed approach by the U.S. government toward the Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front was because those militants were the point of the spear against pro-Iranian Shiite influences in not only Syria but Iraq and Lebanon as well.

So, the Saudi government provided the “clandestine financial and logistic support to Isis and other radical groups in the region,” according to a leaked Hillary Clinton email on Sept. 17, 2014.

Less than a month later, on Oct. 2, 2014, Vice President Biden told a seminar at Harvard’s Kennedy School that “the Saudis, the emirates … poured hundreds of
millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis.”

The DIA report also named the Gulf States as among the “supporting powers” of the Syrian opposition. And at a May 2015 meeting between President Obama and the Princes of the Gulf Cooperation Council, according to David Ignatius of the Washington Post, “Obama and other US officials urged Gulf leaders who are funding the opposition to keep control of their clients, so that a post-Assad regime isn’t controlled by extremists from the Islamic State or al-Qaeda.”

However, with the Israel lobby redirecting Official Washington’s ire toward Iran, more political space was created for these Saudi-connected terror groups to carry out the regime change missions in Syria and elsewhere.

And Israel didn’t just prefer a victory in Syria by the extremists of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. United Nations observers in the Golan Heights reported witnessing cooperation between Israel and Syrian rebels, and Israel has frequently bombed Syrian targets (and here and here).

Netanyahu also reported that Israel has hit Hezbollah forces fighting against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in Syria dozens of times. Recently, it has been revealed that Israel also provided funding, food and fuel to Syrian rebels fighting Assad.

Lebanon’s Crisis

But the Syrian “regime change” strategy didn’t work. With help from Iran and Hezbollah and Russia’s intervention in 2015, Assad and his army not only survived but routed the Islamic State, Al Qaeda’s Nusra and other jihadists from major urban strongholds. Instead of Iran losing an ally in the region, Iran emerged with a stronger alliance and greater influence.

This setback, however, has not changed the Israeli-Saudi priorities; it has only made them more intense. As the outcome in Syria became more apparent, the anti-Iran gun sight pivoted to Lebanon. The recent confusing events in Lebanon, like the earlier ones in Syria, are best made sense of by looking through the gun barrel that is targeted on Iran.

On Nov. 4, after being summoned to Saudi Arabia, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri unexpectedly and mysteriously resigned. Hariri’s resignation came just one day after a meeting in Beirut with Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior foreign policy advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, that was reportedly very positive. Velayati praised Hariri and reaffirmed Iran’s support for his coalition government.
Yet, a day later, speaking from Saudi Arabia, Hariri claimed his resignation was catalyzed by fear of an Iranian-Hezbollah assassination. But the Lebanese army said “it had not uncovered any plans for assassinations in Lebanon.” Neither had the army. So, why resign?

The clue may be provided by Saudi State Minister for Gulf Affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, who expressed Saudi Arabia’s desire for “toppling Hizbullah.” He promised that “The coming developments will definitely be astonishing.” He said the desire was not just his own, and that people “will see what will happen in the coming days.”

The Saudis said Hariri resigned because Hezbollah had “hijacked” his coalition government. Al-Sabhan called Hezbollah “the Party of Satan.”

Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, said that the resignation was “imposed on Prime Minister Hariri” by the Saudis. Nasrallah said Hezbollah did not want Hariri to resign, having been a part of Hariri’s coalition government for almost a year. Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, seemed to share Nasrallah’s suspicion, insisting that he would not accept Hariri’s resignation until Hariri returned to Lebanon from Saudi Arabia because his “resignation must be voluntary.”

In Lebanon, there was the suspicion that Hariri was held under house arrest. On Nov. 10, President Aoun told a meeting of foreign ambassadors that Hariri had been “kidnapped.”

Now, having finally returned to Lebanon after a French intervention brought him to Paris, Hariri met with President Aoun who asked him “to temporarily suspend submitting [his resignation] and to put it on hold ahead of further consultations on the reasons for it.” Hariri agreed.

Israel seems to have applauded Saudi Arabia’s Lebanese action and reaffirmed the Iranian motivation behind it. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that “The resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri and his statements are a wake-up call for the international community to act against Iranian aggression.”

Netanyahu also made a rare public acknowledgement of the Israeli-Saudi alliance when he said that Iran was driving Israel into cooperative arrangements with what he called “the modern Sunni states,” referring to “a new alliance between Israel and Islamic states.” According to reporting by Israel’s Channel 10, a leaked classified cable from the Israeli foreign ministry to Israeli ambassadors reveals that Israel ordered them to support Saudi Arabia’s efforts and to rally support for Hariri’s resignation.

Iran has also suggested that President Trump and the United States approve of this Lebanese intervention. The resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister came
days after Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner visited Saudi Arabia on a trip that was not made known publicly.

Yemen’s Tragedy

While this new alliance took aim at Iran by targeting Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, it also has targeted a Shiite spin-off sect, the Houthis in Yemen. Since 2015, the Saudis have been bombing and blockading Yemen, the Middle East’s poorest country. But on Nov. 5, Saudi Arabia expressed outrage after intercepting a ballistic missile fired by Houthi forces in Yemen toward Riyadh. The Saudis accused Iran of providing the missile and ordering the attack – and called this an “act of war” by Iran and Hezbollah.

General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, called the charge against Iran “baseless,” as did Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, Gholamali Khoshroo. Even Saudi officials were calling the missile a Yemeni Burqan 2H missile when it was intercepted. The Houthis said they fired the missile in response to the long-running Saudi bombardment that included a recent attack that killed 26 people.

Despite these denials of Iranian responsibility and the context of Saudi Arabia’s air war, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Nikki Haley called on the U.N. to hold Iran accountable for violating U.N. Security Council resolutions by supplying the missile. She called on the U.N. to take “necessary action” against Iran.

The U.S. government has consistently rationalized the Saudi bombardment of Yemen as necessary to thwart Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. U.S. accusations about Iran allegedly supplying the Houthis with weapons hang precariously on an “assessment” that Iran has used fishing boats to smuggle weapons into Yemen.

However, according to investigative journalist Gareth Porter, the U.S. was never able to produce any evidence for the link between Iran and the Houthis because the boats were stateless, and their destination was Somalia, not Yemen. An earlier ship was, indeed, Iranian but was not really carrying any weapons.

The Houthis also are allied with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh who maintains control over the army, so the Houthis could get all the weapons they need from local arms supplies, including military bases stocked with American-made weapons.

And just as Iran does not substantially arm the Houthis, so it does not control them. In fact, they have proven to be beyond Tehran’s efforts to influence them. In 2014, the Iranians specifically discouraged the Houthis from capturing the Yemeni capital, Sanaa. However, the Houthis captured the city anyway,
demonstrating Iran’s lack of control.

A U.S. intelligence official told The Huffington Post that “It is wrong to think of the Houthis as a proxy force for Iran.” Yemen specialist Gabriele vom Bruck has called Iran’s influence over the Houthis “trivial.” She said the Houthis want to be independent, not controlled by Iran: “I don’t think the Iranians have influence in their decision-making.” To the extent that Iran is involved in Yemen at all, that involvement came as a result of the devastating Saudi air war.

Dating back to the Obama administration, the U.S. government has made the Saudi aerial bombardment of Yemen possible. The U.S. refuels the Saudi bombers in flight, supplies the bombs and provides targeting intelligence.

This U.S. complicity in what is widely regarded as a humanitarian catastrophe has continued into the Trump administration. A White House statement as recently as Nov. 24 reaffirmed U.S. support for Saudi Arabia, declaring: “We remain committed to supporting Saudi Arabia and all our Gulf partners against the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ aggression and blatant violations of international law. Backed by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Houthi rebels have used destabilizing missile systems to target Saudi Arabia.”

The statement again reveals, not only the alliance with Saudi Arabia and the silence about its devastating bombing attacks, but the strategy of turning Yemen’s human tragedy into another excuse to blame Iran. The Iranian foreign ministry said the White House statement “clearly and without question proves America’s participation and responsibility in the atrocities committed by Saudi Arabia in Yemen”.

**Bahrain & Qatar**

Washington’s Saudi-Israeli-supplied blinders on the Middle East carry over to other regional conflicts, too. For instance, in 2011, protesters in Bahrain demanded a true constitutional monarchy, the resignation of the Prime Minister, greater civil liberties and a real elected parliament. Though Bahrain has a parliament, it is actually governed by the U.S.-backed dictator, King Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa, whose family has ruled Bahrain for over 200 years. The prime minister, the king’s uncle, is the longest reigning prime minister in the world, in power now for nearly 40 years.

Bahrain’s population is about 70 percent Shiite, though the ruling family, the government, the army and the police are all Sunni. The Shia have long been victims of discrimination. And the government maintains its control through repression, including the use of torture. Bahrain is located between Sunni Saudi
Arabia and Shiite Iran and is seen by the U.S. as a strategically located check on Iranian influence and power.

Though the Obama administration touted itself as a big proponent of the “Arab Spring” and its promised democratization, Washington sided with the Bahraini dictators against the majority of the Bahraini people.

Days after mass arrests and beatings of protesters, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, went through with his planned visit to Bahrain where he reaffirmed the U.S.’s strong commitment to its military relationship with Bahrain and called Bahrain’s response to the protests “very measured.” Mullen stressed the U.S.-Bahrain “partnership” and “friendship.”

On the same day, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also gave full support to the Khalifa dictatorship. The U.S. continued to support the regime and to call for “stability” and “reform”: two words that are code for standing by dictatorships.

To help put down the protests in Bahrain, 1,000 Saudi troops invaded Bahrain across a causeway that connects the countries. The Obama administration remained silent.

Qatar also has suffered under the new Saudi-Israeli alliance because Qatar has pursued a more independent foreign policy than Saudi Arabia likes and now faces a Saudi-led siege as a consequence. Former British diplomat Alastair Crooke explained that Qatar’s principal sin is seeking peaceful coexistence with Iran.

When Washington asked Saudi Arabia to make reasonable proposals for the termination of the siege, Saudi Arabia included the demand that Qatar break all ties with Iran.

In other words, many of the most important events of the past several years are best explained as attempts to weaken Iran by weakening its proxies or allies or by setting up situations that appear to implicate Iran to justify hostility toward Iran.

A problem, however, has been that the major terrorist groups that have infuriated the American public are not Iranian-linked Shiites but rather Saudi-connected fundamentalist Sunnis. Still, the claim that “Iran is the chief sponsor of terrorism” has become a rote and routine refrain from both Republicans and Democrats – as well as the U.S. mainstream media.

Much as Russia now gets blamed for every negative turn in Western democracies, Iran is the all-purpose villain whenever anything goes wrong in the Middle East. Yet, to understand these conflicts and crises, it is best to view them through
the perspective of the hostility that the Saudi-Israeli alliance directs toward Iran and the acquiescence of U.S. governments, regardless of which party is in power.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.