

Ending Abdullah Öcalan's Isolation

Giorgio Cafiero explores Ankara's various reasons for granting the imprisoned leader of the PKK access to his lawyers for the first time since 2011.

By **Giorgio Cafiero**

Special to Consortium News



Since his capture in Kenya 20 years ago, Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, leader, has been imprisoned in a small Turkish island in the Sea of Marmara called Imrali. Following Öcalan's extradition to Turkey, he received a death sentence that was commuted following Turkey's **abolishment** of capital punishment in 2002. Now Öcalan's serving a life sentence on terrorism and treason charges. Despite having been locked up since 1999, he retains much influence and still has many followers.

Across Turkey, however, he is widely hated and blamed for leading a terrorist organization, which most Turkish sources claim has killed over **40,000** people. Today many are behind bars in Turkey for sharing videos, memes and posts that glorify him and/or the PKK on social media. When Kurdish activists and exiles in Western countries display their solidarity with Öcalan at public rallies, it angers and offends Turkey to a significant degree.

Öcalan Meets His Lawyers

On May 2, for the first time since 2011, Öcalan was **granted** access to his lawyers, who relayed his messages four days later. He demanded that the U.S.-backed, PKK-affiliated

People's Protection Units, or YPG, which is the dominant force within the Syrian Democratic Forces, respect Turkey's legitimate interests. He stressed the need for Syrian Kurds to support a unified, democratic Syrian nation-state, calling on the YPG to negotiate with Damascus. Also, with roughly 3,000 people in Turkey reportedly on hunger strikes in 90 prisons across the country demanding that Öcalan be granted family and legal visits, the PKK leader told all his loyalists to end self-harmful activities.

Why did the Turkish authorities decide to end Öcalan's eight-year isolation?

Obviously, in the short-term, one goal they achieved by granting Öcalan access to his lawyers was getting him to call on Kurdish politicians and activists to end their hunger strikes. But clearly the decision was based on factors extending beyond concerns about the ramifications of hunger strikes in Turkish prisons. From a cynical standpoint, certain observers attributed the move to a potential plan for the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, to secure more votes from Turkey's Kurdish minority.

Peace with PKK Linked to Syria Deal

Sensitive domestic political considerations aside, Ankara's grander regional concerns were the driving factors. It seems that Turkey's assessment is that resolving the conflict with the PKK internally in Turkey would need to be done through a grander deal that simultaneously settles the difficult YPG-related questions in northern Syria.

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Officials in Ankara recognize the influence that Öcalan maintains over his loyalists – both those north and south of the Turkish-Syrian border – and the Turkish leadership is possibly seeking to leverage that influence in potential future talks with the PKK/YPG. In fact, officials from Turkey's state intelligence agency reportedly recently met with Syrian Democratic Forces commander Mazlum Kobane, who is close to Öcalan, in northern Syria. Moreover, Öcalan's calls for a unified Syria suggest that he could influence the YPG into abandoning aspirations for establishing an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria.

Turkish concerns about the YPG fighting to carve up Syria could ease if there is a deal between Ankara and Damascus following the YPG's potential integration into the Syrian Arab Army. Such diplomatic breakthroughs could keep Ankara from believing it is necessary to launch a third Turkish military campaign against the YPG, following Operation Olive Branch last year and Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016.

Nonetheless, realistically there are major hurdles that will undermine prospects for progress on this front. Bridging the gulf between demands from both Turkey and the YPG could prove extremely challenging.

While Turkey wants to maintain a military presence for 25 miles into northern Syria, the YPG is demanding a full Turkish military withdrawal from the town of Afrin. It is not guaranteed that demands from both Ankara and the YPG could be met simultaneously.

At the same time, it is unclear what would happen to the

Turkish-backed armed Sunni Arab groups in Afrin if Ankara and the YPG end their hostilities, and what role(s) they would play in “post-conflict” Syria, if any at all.

Gulf States Enter Equation

Certain regional factors in play may hinder efforts to resolve the extremely hostile standoff between Turkey and the YPG. As the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia step up their anti-Turkey efforts in Syria, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have sought to counter the expansion of Turkey’s influence in Syria while becoming key stakeholders in the outcome of this eight-year civil war.

Turkish media outlets have accused both Gulf states of supporting the YPG, fueling anti-Saudi and anti-Emirati sentiments in Turkey. In the aftermath of the Qatar crisis’ eruption in 2017, Turkey’s pro-AKP newspaper, *Yeni Safak*, published a photo of Emirati, Saudi, and Egyptian officials meeting with their YPG counterparts in an office with a portrait of Öcalan on the wall.

In recent years a host of multifaceted regional issues have contributed to major tension in Ankara’s relations with both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. These sources of friction include the Libyan civil war, the Qatar crisis, the Jamal Khashoggi murder case, the failed coup plot against Turkey’s government in 2016, the Egyptian coup of 2013, and the recent case of suspected UAE spies in Turkey.

As both the Emirati and Saudi leaders view Turkey as representing a “neo-Ottoman” threat and a sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood (banned as a terror group in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia) amid a period of growing geopolitical

competition in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, Ankara's foreign policy appears on a collision course with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

Within this context, it appears that both the UAE and Saudi Arabia will likely view the YPG as a useful partner in their efforts to simultaneously challenge both Turkey and Iran's positions in "post-conflict" Syria. Doubtless, peace between the YPG and Ankara would remove this lever that the Emiratis and Saudis have reportedly been using in northern Syria in order to step up their efforts against Turkey.

From Ankara's perspective, the UAE's exploitation of Turkey's vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the YPG in northern Syria is a threat to Ankara's core interests in Syria and the greater region. Turkey could deny the UAE an opportunity to use the Kurdish nationalist cause in northern Syria to undermine Ankara if Turkey and the PKK/YPG reach a deal that peacefully resolves Turkey's decades-old conflict with Öcalan's group, and more recently its offshoot in Syria.

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THE ANGRY ARAB: The UAE and the Arab Counter-Revolution

As'ad AbuKhalil looks at Gulf rulers vying to play top host to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

By **As'ad AbuKhalil**

Special to Consortium News



The political role of the United Arab Emirates has changed dramatically since the death of its founding ruler, Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan.

He was officially succeeded by his son, Khalifah bin Zayed, in 2004 but the latter has been largely distant from governmental affairs for health and other reasons. The actual reins are held by Abu Dhabi's highly ambitious Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed. Muhammad has been the effective ruler, along with his brothers on his mother's side, Fatimah bint Mubarak, who control all the key posts of government.

The current de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, has largely emulated Muhammad (known commonly as MbZ, while Muhammad bin Salman is commonly known as MbS).

Under Shaykh Zayed, the UAE avoided internal Arab conflicts and steered its foreign policy largely according to the pan-Arab consensus. While the country was charted by the British colonial powers it smoothly made the transition to a strong alliance with the U.S. Despite tensions with Saudi Arabia it mainly avoided open conflicts.

Shaykh Zayed was a loyal ally, or client, of the U.S. and its interests in the region. And while generally deferring to Saudi hegemony, he paid lip service to the pro-

Palestinian sentiment of the Arab population. In the early 1970s he even welcomed Leila Khalid, the famous commander of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, to the UAE and is said to have made a donation to the PFLP (a small subset of which defected after the incident and started their own small organization).

Muslim Brotherhood in Ministries

Shaykh Zayed was uneducated and was not known for speech-making. His country benefited from the educated Palestinian community. He also invited Muslim Brotherhood functionaries to fill various posts in justice and education ministries.

Zayed, for instance, invited Hasan Al-Turabi, the famous Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood leader, to help draft the UAE constitution. This was a time when both the UAE and Saudi Arabia enthusiastically welcomed Muslim Brotherhood leaders and members to combat the tide of secular Arab nationalism and leftism in the region.

In his last year, Zayed increasingly surrendered power to his sons and his last political role was in 2003 when he proposed an initiative according to which Saddam Husain would relinquish power in return for the U.S. backing away from war with Iraq (an initiative in which neither the U.S. nor Saddam showed any interest).

MbZ has taken the UAE in a very different direction. He has clearly wanted to make the UAE a sort of new Arab Israel, which could serve the interests of the U.S. MbZ was interested in military-intelligence affairs and built up his power from that basis.

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His rule has been characterized by 1) establishment of covert, but strong relations with Israel; 2) an open war against the Muslim Brotherhood; 3) competition with Qatar and Saudi Arabia for regional dominance, especially after the demise of Saddam's regime; 4) direct involvement in Palestinian affairs through the agency of Muhammad Dahlan, the notoriously shady Palestinian intelligence figure; and 5) heavy lobbying in Washington, with disregard for Arab public opinion on all matters.

MbZ was not satisfied with being one of many loyal allies/clients of the U.S. in the Middle East. He has sought to rival Israel in serving as a strategic partner of the U.S. in the region and outdo Jordan in providing intelligence and military services. His military emphasizes special forces and hosts one of the biggest U.S. intelligence stations in the world. MbZ also invested in buying influence in Washington.

Intense D.C. Courtship

The role of his D.C. ambassador, Yousef Al-Otaiba, who courted journalists, officials, and think tank experts with unprecedented intensity, has become well-known. UAE money flowed into think tanks, and the UAE received favorable coverage in Western media. It also helped that Al-Otaiba established a strong friendship with the Israeli ambassador and the Israeli lobby began to promote both Saudi and UAE regime interests in Washington, after both regimes had abandoned a verbal commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Arab lobbies – no matter what states or interests they represent, no matter how well-funded they are – can't achieve great success without the blessings of the Israeli lobby.

The AWACs sale to Saudi Arabia during the Reagan years was an exception: a time when the Saudi regime – supported by a different Republican Party prior to the rise of the Evangelical Zionists – prevailed against the Israeli lobby.

The Saudi and UAE regime took a back seat to Qatar in 2011 and 2013. For the first few years of the Arab uprisings, Doha was in the driver's seat. The Saudi King, Abdullah, was too feeble to run the affairs of his own government, let alone the affairs of the Arab regional system. Qatari foreign ministers ran the Arab League in the first few years after the Arab uprisings and arranged for the ouster of Syria from the Arab League.

Qatar, after all, was celebrating the victory of its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, Libya and most importantly Egypt. They also were on the ascendancy in Yemen. The Arab counter-revolution was in Doha's hands during this time: the Qatari regime was making sure that the popular protests didn't get out of hand and didn't disturb the Arab regional system.

The Qatari regime also negotiated a deal between the local Muslim Brotherhoods and the Israeli lobby in Washington, according to which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood would not challenge the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, and the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood would stop an article criminalizing normalization with Israel, which was high on the protesters' agenda, from entering the new constitution.

Quietly Sponsoring a Coup in Egypt

But the UAE was not dormant during those times. It was quietly sponsoring a coup in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood, and preparing for an open war against it throughout the Arab world, in every country where the Brotherhood may have had a chance of electoral success.

The UAE created a front (the Egyptian youth movement, Tamarrud) and worked with Egypt's General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to oust the first freely elected president in the country's history.

It also supported the relics of the ancien regime in Tunisia, and sponsored Gen. Khalifa Haftar in Libya. In 2015, when Salman ascended the Saudi throne, MbZ became the chief counsel and advocate for Salman's son MbS in Washington.

The two seemed to agree on the need to expel Qatar from the affairs of Arab politics and to engineer together a tougher war on Iran. They both launched – with Western support – the war on Yemen assuming, wrongly, that it would be over in a few weeks.

The current era in Arab politics is largely the design of MbZ with the enthusiastic support of MbS. But the two personalities are quite different. While MbS is flashy and outspoken, MbZ keeps a low-profile. MbS likes to impress Western audiences (and he succeeded in doing that until the murder of Jamal Khashoggi last year). MbZ, by contrast, only cares about impressing the White House and his interlocutors in Tel Aviv.

MbZ is now trying to influence events in Sudan and Algeria where he maintains close ties to the ruling militaries and wants to prevent democratic rule in both countries. Protest signs against UAE and Saudi intervention were visible in Sudanese demonstrations that led last month to the fall of President [Omar al-Bashir](#) (MbZ intelligence advisor, Muhammad Dahlan, visited Sudan the other day).

In Yemen, MbZ has been quite assertive and even clashed with the Saudi regime to promote his own clients there. The ability of MbZ to continue playing his leadership role on behalf of the U.S. and Israel may not last forever. In the meantime, however, MbZ has emerged as Israel's enforcer in the region; a role that is bound to earn him accolades in Washington, and especially on Capitol Hill.

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The US Should Get Ready for King Mohammed bin Salman

Riyadh finds it outrageous that American lawmakers are trying to meddle in Saudi Arabia's succession, writes

Giorgio Cafiero.

By Giorgio Cafiero

Special to Consortium News



Since the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2, some American lawmakers have assumed the right and moral authority to dictate the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's succession line-up. In November, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham accused Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) of being "crazy" and asserted that "he needs to go." Such rhetoric is significant given that the U.S. has not meddled in the Al Saud family's internal power struggles since the 1960s. But regardless of the preferences that some politicians in Washington may have regarding Saudi Arabia's succession, the U.S. will likely have to accept dealing with a King Mohammed.

MbS's ascendancy, which began in 2015, has transformed Saudi Arabia. Gone is Saudi Arabia's traditional model of leadership of the pre-MbS era that was based on collective decision-making and consensus building among a large group of princes. By virtue of how much power MbS possesses, it is difficult to imagine any credible challenge to his rule, or position in the succession lineup, no matter the pressure Washington might try to impose.

Even before the Khashoggi affair, MbS's power in Riyadh was so consolidated that the millennial prince faced virtually no constraints from other members of the Al Saud family. In recent months, MbS has only further consolidated his power in the Kingdom despite all the criticisms that MbS has

received from lawmakers in the U.S. following the CIA's conclusion that he ordered Khashoggi's murder. Not even the political fallout of the journalist's slaying last year has caused MbS to ease his internal crackdown, or even his targeting of Saudi dissidents overseas with efforts to lure them back to the Kingdom.

Thus, given that the Saudi security apparatus and all the dominant state institutions are under MbS's consolidated control, it is extremely difficult to imagine any successful opposition to the millennial prince from within. While many in the House of Saud dislike MbS, they lack the ability to collectively stop him.

As the Kingdom is an absolute monarchy, the decision to change the succession order can only be made by King Salman. Although Salman, since he became the Saudi monarch in January 2015, has twice dismissed/forced out two other crown princes – Prince Muqrin (in April 2015) and Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (in June 2017) – he has shown no signs of removing his son from succession.

Riyadh: Butt Out

From Riyadh's perspective, foreign powers need to butt out and stop naively pretending they can influence the process. Furthermore, outside pressure on King Salman to fire his son could backfire and give the Saudi leadership more interest in standing by MbS. As Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former chief of Saudi intelligence and a former ambassador to Washington, put it: "The more [foreign] criticism there is of the crown prince, the more popular he is in the kingdom."

Indeed, officials in Riyadh find it outrageous that American

lawmakers are trying to weigh in on Saudi Arabia's succession question – a redline for the Kingdom's leadership. For Saudi Arabia's ruling family, changing the succession lineup under pressure from the U.S. government would signal weakness and subservience to the world's superpower at a time when Riyadh is working to project Saudi dominance in the Middle East and greater autonomy from the West as the world becomes more multipolar.

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Such pressure from the U.S. would likely accelerate Riyadh's eastward geopolitical pivot which has led to Saudi Arabia investing in deeper ties with China, India, Pakistan, and Russia. With the Saudi leadership questioning the long-term commitment of the U.S. to the Kingdom's security, Riyadh is attempting to diversify its global alliances and partnerships in order to gain greater geopolitical independence from Saudi Arabia's traditional Western allies. The silence from these non-Western governments on the Khashoggi file underscores such non-Western states' keenness to avoid criticizing Saudi Arabia on human rights grounds—a factor that has earned them goodwill with MbS—in order to capitalize on all that deeper ties with Riyadh can offer. In the case of both China and Russia, the Khashoggi case has provided an opportunity to drive a greater wedge between the U.S. and its main ally in the Persian Gulf.

Bilateral Risk

If Trump's successor shares Sen. Graham's view that MbS should never become the King of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh's

alliance with Washington could face an unprecedented bilateral crisis. Already, with MbS' reputation among American lawmakers and members of the DC establishment having suffered immense damage following Khashoggi's killing, the Crown Prince simply cannot make a visit to Washington. While for the time being MbS can continue working with a U.S. president whose administration has taken pains to give the crown prince the benefit of the doubt on the Khashoggi file, questions about Saudi-U.S. relations in the post-Trump era must unsettle the Saudi leadership. Given the rhetoric about Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-U.S. alliance coming from some Democratic presidential hopefuls, such as Sen. [Bernie Sanders](#) and Rep. [Tulsi Gabbard](#), such concerns cannot be dismissed by MbS.

Of course, there is a potential scenario whereby MbS is targeted internally, possibly meeting the same fate as Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who was assassinated. This would prevent the crown prince from becoming custodian of the two holy mosques (the Saudi king's official title since 1986). But such a scenario appears unlikely. What is far more probable is that MbS will become Saudi Arabia's next king, even if this fuels rage in the U.S. Senate. As much as many officials in Washington take major issue with MbS, accepting the unacceptable will likely be necessary. The U.S. will have to contend, one way or another, with a King Mohammed ruling Washington's most important Arab ally and the country that leads globally in oil production and exports.

Doubtless, the implications of MbS becoming the next Saudi king will be felt across the greater MENA region and beyond.

As evidenced by the war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar, the Saudi-Canadian diplomatic spat of August 2018, the Ritz Carlton arrests and Saad Hariri saga of 2017, the millennial prince has made foreign policy decisions that reflect his brashness and impulsive thinking. If MbS has already created such crises for Saudi Arabia and its relationship with Washington over the course of the past four years, it is truly mind boggling to think about what he, as the next king of Saudi Arabia, could do to change the Kingdom and the greater Middle East during the upcoming four or five decades if he rules until his natural death.

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ANGRY ARAB: Memories and Omissions of the Iraq Wars

The Iraq wars and their consequences have been callous, bipartisan campaigns that have profoundly altered Arabs' views of the United States, says As'ad AbuKhalil.

By [As'ad AbuKhalil](#)

Special to Consortium News



It has been sixteen years since the U.S. invasion of Iraq of 2003. The event barely gets a mention in the U.S. press or is any longer part of American consciousness. Iraq remains a faraway land for most Americans and the remembrance of the Iraq war is only discussed from the standpoint of U.S. strategic blunders. Little attention is paid to the suffering and humiliation of the Iraqi people by the American war apparatus. Wars for Americans are measured in U.S. dollars and American blood: suffering of the natives is not registered in war metrics.

The Iraq calamity is not an issue that can be dismissively blamed on George W. Bush alone. For most Democrats, it is too easy to blame the war on that one man. In reality, the Iraq war and its consequences have been a callous bipartisan campaign which had begun in the administration of George HW Bush and Bill Clinton after him. The war and the tight, inhumane sanctions established a record of punishment of civilians, or the use of civilians as tools of U.S. pressure on foreign governments, which became a staple of U.S. foreign policy.

The U.S. government under Ronald Reagan resisted pressures to impose sanctions on South Africa under the pretext that sanctions would “hurt the people that we want to help”—this at a time when the blacks of South Africa were calling on the world to impose sanctions to bring down the apartheid regime. This was the last time that the U.S. resisted the imposition of sanctions on a country.

For the Arab people, the successive wars on Iraq—and the sanctions should be counted as part of the cruel war effort of the U.S. and its allies—changed forever the structure of the Middle East regional system. The wars established a direct U.S. occupation of Arab lands and it reversed the trend since WWII whereby the U.S. settled for control and hegemony, but without the direct occupation. (The U.S. only left the Philippines because Japan had

awarded independence to the country during the war, long after the U.S. failed to deliver on promises of independence).

Washington succeeded in the political arrangement designed by the Bush-Baker team to create an unannounced alliance between the Israeli occupation state and the reactionary Arab regime system, which included the Syrian regime, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Gulf states in the same sphere. This arrangement served to oppress the Arab population and to prevent political protests from disrupting U.S. military and political plans, and to ensure the survival of the oppressive regimes who are willing to cooperate with the U.S. The Syrian regime, which cooperated with Washington in the 1991 Iraq war was even rewarded with control of Lebanon.

But the war on Iraq altered the regional structure of regimes. They were no more split into progressive and reactionary. Syria in the past was associated with the "rejectionist stance," even though the Syrian regime never joined the "Rejectionist Front" of the 1970s led by Saddam Hussein, the arch enemy of Syrian leader Hafidh Al-Asad.

It was no coincidence that the U.S. invaded Iraq and expelled Saddam's army from Kuwait in the wake of the end of the Soviet Union. The U.S. wanted to assert the new rules just as it asserted the new rules of Middle East politics after WWII when it signaled to Britain in 1956 in Suez that it is the U.S. and not Europe which now controls the Middle East region. Similarly, the Iraq war of 1991 was an opportunity for the U.S. to impose its hegemony directly and without fears of escalation in super power conflict.

The U.S. did not need direct control or colonization after after WWII, with the exception of oil-rich Gulf region. (Historian Daniel Immerwahr makes that argument persuasively in his brand new book, "How to Hide and Empire: A History of the Greater United States.") After the 1973 oil embargo on Western countries because of U.S. support for Israel in that year's war, the U.S. military had plans on the books for the seizure of Gulf Arab oil fields. But the

significance of oil has diminished over the decade especially as fracking has allowed the U.S. to export more oil than it imports.

Indelible Memory

Furthermore, the previous reluctance of Gulf leaders to host U.S. troops evaporated with the 1991 war.

But the memory of that first Iraq war remains deep in the Arab memory. Here was a flagrant direct military intervention which relied for its promotion on a mix of lies and fabrications. The U.S. wanted to oppose dictatorship while its intervention relied on the assistance of brutal dictators and its whole campaign was to—in name at least—to restore a polygamous Emir to his throne.

The U.S. also bought about official Arab League abandonment of Israel's boycott, which had been in place since the founding of the state of Israel. As a reward for U.S. convening of the Madrid conference in 1991, Arab despots abandoned the boycott in the hope that Washington would settle the Palestinian problem one way or another. Yet, the precedent of deploying massive U.S. troops in the region was established and the U.S. quickly made it clear that it was not leaving the region anytime soon. Regimes that wanted U.S. protection were more than eager to pay for large-scale U.S. military bases to host U.S. troops and intelligence services. But that war in 1991 was not the only Iraq war; in fact, Washington was also complicit in the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran war, when it did its best to prolong the conflict, resulting in the deaths of some half million Iraqis and Iranians.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not about finishing an unfinished business by son toward his father. It certainly was not about finding and destroying WMDs. And no one believed that this was about democracy or freedom. The quick victory in the war of Afghanistan created wild delusions for the U.S. war machine. Bush and his lieutenants were under the impression that wars in the region could be fought and won quickly and on the cheap. The

rhetoric of “the axis-of-evil” was a message from the U.S. to all its enemies that the U.S. would dominate the region and would overthrow the few regimes which are not in its camp. The quick “victory” in Kabul was illusory about what had just happened in Afghanistan. Seventeen years later the U.S. is now begging the Taliban—which it had gone to war to overthrow—to return to power to end the agony for U.S. troops and for U.S. puppets in the country who are terrified of the prospect of a country free of U.S. occupation.

Iraq created new images of the U.S.: from Abu Ghraib to the wanton shooting at civilians by U.S. troops or by contractors, to the installation of a puppet government and the issuance of capitalistic decrees and laws to prevent the Iraqi government from ever filing war crime charges against the occupiers. Arabs and Muslims developed new reasons to detest the U.S.: it is not only about Israel anymore but about the U.S. sponsorship of a corrupt and despotic regional order. It is also about Arabs witnessing first hand the callous and reckless forms of U.S. warfare in the region. Policy makers, think tank experts, and journalists in DC may debate the technical aspects of the war and the cost incurred by the U.S.. But for the natives, counting the dead and holding the killers responsible remains the priority. And the carnage caused by ISIS and its affiliates in several Arab countries is also blamed—and rightly so—on U.S. military intervention in the Middle East.

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Is War With Iran on the Horizon?

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war, says Bob Dreyfuss for TomDispatch.

The Trump Administration is Reckless Enough to Turn the Cold War With Iran Into a Hot One

By **Bob Dreyfuss**

TomDispatch.com



Here's the foreign policy question of questions in 2019: Are President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, all severely weakened at home and with few allies abroad, reckless enough to set off a war with Iran?

Could military actions designed to be limited – say, a heightening of the Israeli bombing of Iranian forces inside Syria, or possible U.S. cross-border attacks from Iraq, or a clash between American and Iranian naval ships in the Persian Gulf – trigger a wider war?

Worryingly, the answers are: yes and yes. Even though Western Europe has lined up in opposition to any future conflict with Iran, even though Russia and China would rail against it, even though most Washington foreign policy experts would be horrified by the outbreak of such a war, it could happen.

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and

even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war. Years of politically charged anti-Iranian vituperation might blow up in the faces of President Trump and his two most hawkish aides, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, setting off a conflict with potentially catastrophic implications.

Such a war could quickly spread across much of the Middle East, not just to Saudi Arabia and Israel, the region's two major anti-Iranian powers, but Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the various Persian Gulf states. It might indeed be, as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani suggested last year (unconsciously echoing Iran's former enemy, Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein) the "mother of all wars."

With Bolton and Pompeo, both well-known Iranophobes, in the driver's seat, few restraints remain on President Trump when it comes to that country. White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, President Trump's former favorite generals who had urged caution, are no longer around. And though the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution last month calling for the United States to return to the nuclear agreement that President Obama signed, there are still a significant number of congressional Democrats who believe that Iran is a major threat to U.S. interests in the region.

During the Obama years, it was *de rigueur* for Democrats to support the president's conclusion that Iran was a prime state sponsor of terrorism and should be treated accordingly. And the congressional Democrats now leading the party on foreign policy – Eliot Engel, who currently chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Bob Menendez and Ben Cardin, the two ranking Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – were opponents of the 2015 nuclear accord (though all three now claim to have changed their minds).

Deadly Flashpoints for a Future War

On the roller coaster ride that is Donald Trump's foreign policy, it's hard to discern what's real and what isn't, what's rhetoric and what's not. When it comes to Iran, it's reasonable to assume that Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo aren't planning an updated version of the unilateral invasion of Iraq that President George W. Bush launched in the spring of 2003.

Yet by openly calling for the toppling of the government in Tehran, by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement and reimposing onerous sanctions to cripple that country's economy, by encouraging Iranians to rise up in revolt, by overtly supporting various exile groups (and perhaps covertly even terrorists), and by joining with Israel and Saudi Arabia in an informal anti-Iranian alliance, the three of them are clearly attempting to force the collapse of the Iranian regime, which just celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

There are three potential flashpoints where limited skirmishes, were they to break out, could quickly escalate into a major shooting war.

The first is in Syria and Lebanon. Iran is deeply involved in defending Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (who only recently returned from a visit to Tehran) and closely allied with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite political party with a potent paramilitary arm. Weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu openly boasted that his country's air force had successfully taken out Iranian targets in Syria. In fact, little noticed here, dozens of such strikes have taken place for more than a year, with mounting Iranian casualties.

Until now, the Iranian leadership has avoided a direct response that would heighten the confrontation with Israel, just as it has avoided unleashing Hezbollah, a well-armed, battle-tested proxy force. That could, however, change if the hardliners in Iran decided to retaliate. Should this simmering conflict explode, does anyone doubt that President Trump would soon join the fray on Israel's side or that congressional Democrats would quickly succumb

to the administration's calls to back the Jewish state?

Next, consider Iraq as a possible flashpoint for conflict. In February, a blustery Trump told CBS's *Face the Nation* that he intends to keep U.S. forces in Iraq "because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is the real problem." His comments did not exactly go over well with the Iraqi political class, since many of that country's parties and militias are backed by Iran.

Trump's declaration followed a *Wall Street Journal* report late last year that Bolton had asked the Pentagon – over the opposition of various generals and then-Secretary of Defense Mattis – to prepare options for "retaliatory strikes" against Iran. This roughly coincided with a couple of small rocket attacks against Baghdad's fortified Green Zone and the airport in Basra, Iraq's Persian Gulf port city, neither of which caused any casualties.

Writing in Foreign Affairs, however, Pompeo blamed Iran for the attacks, which he called "life-threatening," adding, "Iran did not stop these attacks, which were carried out by proxies it has supported with funding, training, and weapons." No "retaliatory strikes" were launched, but plans do undoubtedly now exist for them and it's not hard to imagine Bolton and Pompeo persuading Trump to go ahead and use them – with incalculable consequences.

Finally, there's the Persian Gulf itself. Ever since the George W. Bush years, the U.S. Navy has worried about possible clashes with Iran's naval forces in those waters and there have been a number of high-profile incidents. The Obama administration tried (but failed) to establish a hotline of sorts that would have linked U.S. and Iranian naval commanders and so make it easier to defuse any such incident, an initiative championed by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen, a longtime opponent of war with Iran.

Under Trump, however, all bets are off. Last year, he requested that Mattis prepare plans to blow up Iran's "fast

boats,” small gunboats in the Gulf, reportedly asking, “Why don’t we sink them?” He’s already reinforced the U.S. naval presence there, getting Iran’s attention. Not surprisingly, the Iranian leadership has responded in kind. Earlier this year, President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country had developed submarines capable of launching cruise missiles against naval targets. The Iranians also began a series of Persian Gulf war games and, in late February, test fired one of those sub-launched missiles.

Add in one more thing: in an eerie replay of a key argument George Bush and Dick Cheney used for going to war with Iraq in 2003, in mid-February the right-wing media outlet *Washington Times* ran an “exclusive” report with this headline: “Iran-Al Qaeda Alliance may provide legal rationale for U.S. military strikes.”

Back in 2002, the Office of Special Plans at Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon, under the supervision of neoconservatives Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, spent months trying to prove that al-Qaeda and Iraq were in league. *The Washington Times* piece, citing Trump administration sources, made a similar claim – that Iran is now aiding and abetting al-Qaeda with a “clandestine sanctuary to funnel fighters, money, and weapons across the Middle East.”

It added that the administration is seeking to use this information to establish “a potential legal justification for military strikes against Iran or its proxies.” Needless to say, few are the terrorism experts or Iran specialists who would agree that Iran has anything like an active relationship with al-Qaeda.

Will the Hardliners Triumph in Iran as in Washington?

The Trump administration is, in fact, experiencing increasing difficulty finding allies ready to join a new Coalition of the Willing to confront Iran. The only two charter members so far, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are, however, enthusiastic indeed. Last month, Prime Minister Netanyahu was heard remarking that Israel and

its Arab allies want war with Iran.

At a less-than-successful mid-February summit meeting Washington organized in Warsaw, Poland, to recruit world leaders for a future crusade against Iran, Netanyahu was heard to say in Hebrew: “This is an open meeting with representatives of leading Arab countries that are sitting down together with Israel in order to advance the common interest of war with Iran.” (He later insisted that the correct translation should have been “combating Iran,” but the damage had already been done.)

That Warsaw summit was explicitly designed to build an anti-Iranian coalition, but many of America’s allies, staunchly opposing Trump’s decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear accord, would have nothing to do with it. In an effort to mollify the Europeans in particular, the United States and Poland awkwardly renamed it: “The Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East.”

The name change, however, fooled no one. As a result, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo were embarrassed by a series of no-shows: the French, the Germans, and the European Union, among others, flatly declined to send ministerial-level representatives, letting their ambassadors in Warsaw stand in for them. The many Arab nations not in thrall to Saudi Arabia similarly sent only low-level delegations. Turkey and Russia boycotted altogether, convening a summit of their own in which Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Iran’s Rouhani.

Never the smoothest diplomat, Pence condemned, insulted, and vilified the Europeans for refusing to go along with Washington’s wrecking-ball approach. He began his speech to the conference by saying: “The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal.” He then launched a direct attack on Europe’s efforts to preserve that accord by seeking a way around the sanctions Washington had re-imposed: “Sadly, some of our leading European partners... have led the effort to create mechanisms

to break up our sanctions. We call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran's murderous revolutionary regime."

That blast at the European allies should certainly have brought to mind Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's disparaging comments in early 2003 about Germany and France, in particular, being leaders of the "old Europe." Few allies then backed Washington's invasion plans, which, of course, didn't prevent war. Europe's reluctance now isn't likely to prove much of a deterrent either.

But Pence is right that the Europeans have taken steps to salvage the Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In particular, they've created a "special purpose vehicle" known as INSTEX (Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges) designed "to support legitimate trade with Iran," according to a statement from the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Great Britain. It's potentially a big deal and, as Pence noted, explicitly designed to circumvent the sanctions Washington imposed on Iran after Trump's break with the JCPOA.

INSTEX has a political purpose, too. The American withdrawal from the JCPOA was a body blow to President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and other centrists in Tehran who had taken credit for, and pride in, the deal between Iran and the six world powers (the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Russia, and China) that signed the agreement. That deal had been welcomed in Iran in part because it seemed to ensure that country's ability to expand its trade to the rest of the world, including its oil exports, free of sanctions.

Even before Trump abandoned the deal, however, Iran was already finding U.S. pressure overwhelming and, for the average Iranian, things hadn't improved in any significant way. Worse yet, in the past year the economy had taken a nosedive, the currency had plunged, inflation was running rampant, and strikes and street demonstrations had broken out, challenging the government and its clerical leadership. Chants of "Death to the Dictator!" – not heard

since the Green Movement's revolt against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009 – once again resounded in street demonstrations.

At the end of February, it seemed as if Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo had scored a dangerous victory when Zarif, Iran's well-known, Western-oriented foreign minister, announced his resignation. Moderates who supported the JCPOA, including Rouhani and Zarif, have been under attack from the country's hardliners since Trump's pullout. As a result, Zarif's decision was widely assumed to be a worrisome sign that those hardliners had claimed their first victim.

There was even unfounded speculation that, without Zarif, who had worked tirelessly with the Europeans to preserve what was left of the nuclear pact, Iran itself might abandon the accord and resume its nuclear program. And there's no question that the actions and statements of Bolton, Pompeo, and crew have undermined Iran's moderates, while emboldening its hardliners, who are making I-told-you-so arguments to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader.

Despite the internal pressure on Zarif, however, his resignation proved short-lived indeed: Rouhani rejected it, and there was an upsurge of support for him in Iran's parliament. Even General Qassem Soleimani, a major figure in that country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the commander of the Quds Force, backed him.

As it happens, the Quds Force, an arm of the IRGC, is responsible for Iran's paramilitary and foreign intelligence operations throughout the region, but especially in Iraq and Syria. That role has allowed Soleimani to assume responsibility for much of Iran's foreign policy in the region, making him a formidable rival to Zarif – a tension that undoubtedly contributed to his brief resignation and it isn't likely to dissipate anytime soon.

According to [analysts](#) and [commentators](#), it appears to have been a ploy by Zarif (and perhaps Rouhani, too) to win a vote of political confidence and it appears to have strengthened their hand for the time being.

Still, the Zarif resignation crisis threw into stark relief the deep tensions within Iranian politics and raised a key question: As the Trump administration accelerates its efforts to seek a confrontation, will they find an echo among Iranian hardliners who'd like nothing more than a face-off with the United States?

Maybe that's exactly what Bolton and Pompeo want. If so, prepare yourself: another American war unlikely to work out the way anyone in Washington dreams is on the horizon.

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Telling Only Part of the Story of Jihad

A CNN star reporter should not be shocked to learn that U.S. allies are consorting with Yemeni terrorists, writes Daniel Lazare.

By [Daniel Lazare](#)

Special to Consortium News



A recent *CNN* report about U.S. military materiel finding its way into Al Qaeda hands in Yemen might have been a valuable addition to Americans' knowledge of terrorism.

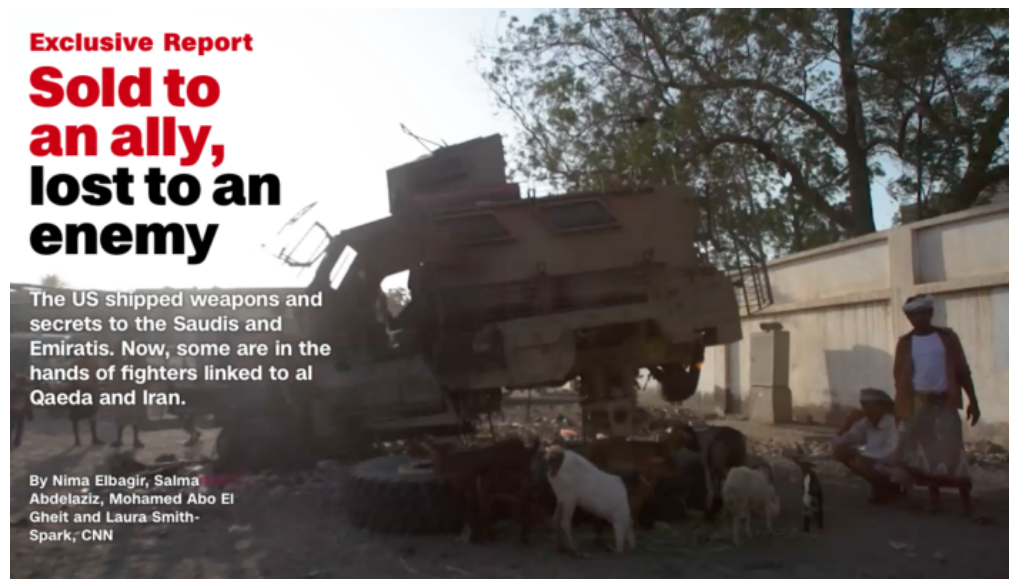
Entitled "[Sold to an ally, lost to an enemy](#)," the 10-minute segment, broadcast on Feb. 4, featured rising *CNN* star [Nima Elbagir](#) cruising past sand-colored "Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected" armored vehicles, or MRAPs, lining a Yemeni highway.

"It's absolutely incredible," she says. "And this is not under the control of [Saudi-led] coalition forces. This is in the command of militias, which is expressly forbidden by the arms sales agreements with the U.S."

"That's just the tip of the iceberg," she adds.

"*CNN* was told by coalition sources that a deadlier U.S. weapons system, the

TOW missile, was airdropped in 2015 by Saudi Arabia to Yemeni fighters, an air drop that was proudly proclaimed across Saudi backed media channels." The TOWs were dropped into Al Qaeda-controlled territory, according to *CNN*. But when Elbagir tries to find out more, the local coalition-backed government chases her and her crew out of town.



U.S.-made TOWs in the hands of Al Qaeda? Elbagir is an effective on-screen presence. But this is an old story, which the cable network has long soft-pedaled.

In the early days of the Syrian War, Western media was reluctant to acknowledge that the forces arrayed against the Assad regime included Al Qaeda. In those days, the opposition was widely portrayed as a belated ripple effect of the Arab Spring pro-democracy uprisings elsewhere in the region.

However, in April-May 2015, right around the time that the Saudis were air-dropping TOWs into Yemen, they were also supplying the same optically-guided, high-tech missiles to pro-Al Qaeda forces in Syria's northern Idlib province. Rebel leaders were exultant as they drove back Syrian government troops. TOWs "flipped the balance," one [said](#), while another [declared](#): "I would put the advances down to one word – TOW."

CNN reported that story very differently. From rebel-held territory, *CNN's* Nick Paton Walsh [described](#) the missiles as a "possible game-changer ... that may finally be wearing down the less popular side of the Shia-Sunni divide." He conceded it wasn't all good news: "A major downside for Washington at least, is that the often-victorious rebels, the Nusra Front, are Al Qaeda. But while the winners for now are America's enemies, the fast-changing ground in Syria may cause to happen what the Obama administration has long sought and preached, and that's changing the calculus of the Assad regime."

[Foreign Policy](#), [The Washington Post](#), [The Guardian](#), and [The](#)

[New York Times](#) all reacted the same way, frowning their brows at the news that Al Qaeda was gaining, but expressing measured relief that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was at last on the ropes.

But now that Elbagir is sounding the alarm about TOWs in Yemen, *CNN* would do well to acknowledge that it has been distinctly more blasé in the past about TOWs in the hands of al Qaeda.

The network appears unwilling to go where Washington's pro-war foreign-policy establishment doesn't want it to go. Elbagir shouldn't be shocked to learn that U.S. allies are consorting with Yemeni terrorists.

U.S. History with Holy Warriors

What *CNN* producers and correspondents either don't know or fail to mention is that Washington has a long history of supporting jihad. As Ian Johnson notes in ["A Mosque in Munich"](#) (2010), the policy was mentioned by President Dwight Eisenhower, who was eager, according to White House memos, "to stress the 'holy war' aspect" in his talks with Muslim leaders about the Cold War Communist menace." [See ["How U.S. Allies Aid Al Qaeda in Syria,"](#) Consortium News, Aug. 4, 2015.]

Britain had been involved with Islamists at least as far back as 1925 when it helped establish the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and both the U.S. and Britain worked with Islamists in the 1953 coup in Iran, according to Robert Dreyfus in ["Devil's Game"](#) (2006).

By the 1980s a growing Islamist revolt against a left-

leaning, pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan brought U.S. support. In mid-1979, President Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, armed the Afghan mujahideen – not at first to drive the Soviets out, but to lure them in. Brzezinski intended to deal Moscow a Vietnam-sized blow, as he put it in a 1998 interview.

Meanwhile, a few months after the U.S. armed the mujahideen, the Saudis were deeply shaken when Islamist extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca and called for the overthrow of the royal family. While Saudi Arabia has been keen to repress jihadism at home, it has been a major supporter of Sunni extremists in the region, particularly to battle the Shi'ite regime that came to power in Tehran, also in 1979.

Since then, the U.S. has made use of jihad, either directly or indirectly, with the Gulf oil monarchies or Pakistan's notoriously pro-Islamist Inter-Services Intelligence agency. U.S. backing for the Afghan mujahideen helped turn Osama bin Laden into a hero for some young Saudis and other Sunnis, while the training camp he established in the Afghan countryside drew jihadists from across the region.

U.S. backing for Alija Izetbegovic's Islamist government in Bosnia-Herzegovina brought al-Qaeda to the Balkans, while U.S.-Saudi support for Islamist militants in the Second Chechen War of 1999-2000 enabled it to establish a base of operations there.

Downplaying Al Qaeda

Just six years after 9/11, according to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, the U.S. downplayed the fight

against Al Qaeda to rein in Iran – a policy, Hersh wrote, that had the effect of “bolstering ... Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”

Under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, policy toward Al-Qaeda turned even more curious. In March 2011, she devoted nearly two weeks to persuading Qatar, the UAE and Jordan to join the air war against Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, only to stand by and watch as Qatar then poured hundreds of millions of dollars of aid into the hands of Islamist militias that were spreading anarchy from one end of the country to the other. The Obama administration thought of remonstrating with Qatar, but didn’t in the end.

Much the same happened in Syria where, by early 2012, Clinton was organizing a “Friends of Syria” group that soon began channeling military aid to Islamist forces waging war against Christians, Alawites, secularists and others backing Assad. By August 2012, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that “the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the [anti-Assad] insurgency”; that the West, Turkey, and the Gulf states supported it regardless; that the rebels’ goal was to establish “a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that “this is exactly what the supporting powers want in order to isolate the Syrian regime...”

Biden Speaks Out

Two years after that, Vice President Joe Biden declared at Harvard’s Kennedy School:

“Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. ... The Saudis, the Emiratis, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were al Nusra and al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” (Quote starts at [53:25.](#))

The fact that Obama ordered the vice president to [apologize](#) to the Saudis, the UAE and Turkey for his comments provided [back-handed confirmation](#) that they were true. When TOWs turned up in the hands of pro-Qaeda rebels in Syria the following spring, all a senior administration official would say was: “It’s not something we would refrain from raising with our partners.”

It was obvious that Al Qaeda would be a prime beneficiary of Saudi intervention in Yemen from the start. Tying down the Houthis – “Al Qaeda’s most determined foe,” according to the [Times](#) – gave it space to blossom and grow. Where the State Department [said](#) it had up to 4,000 members as of 2015, a [UN report](#) put its membership at between 6,000 and 7,000 three years later, an increase of 50 to 75 percent or more.

In early 2017, the International Crisis Group [found](#) that Al Qaeda was “thriving in an environment of state collapse, growing sectarianism, shifting alliances, security vacuums and a burgeoning war economy.”

In Yemen, Al Qaeda “has regularly fought alongside Saudi-led

coalition forces in ... Aden and other parts of the south, including Taiz, indirectly obtaining weapons from them," the ICG added. "...In northern Yemen ... the [Saudi-led] coalition has engaged in tacit alliances with AQAP fighters, or at least turned a blind eye to them, as long as they have assisted in attacking the common enemy."

In May 2016, a *PBS* [documentary](#) showed Al Qaeda members fighting side by side with UAE forces near Taiz. (See "[The Secret Behind the Yemen War](#)," *Consortium News*, May 7, 2016.)

Last August, an *Associated Press* investigative team [found](#) that the Saudi-led coalition had cut secret deals with Al Qaeda fighters, "paying some to leave key cities and towns and letting others retreat with weapons, equipment, and wads of looted cash." Saudi-backed militias "actively recruit Al Qaeda militants," the *AP* team added, "...because they're considered exceptional fighters" and also supply them with armored trucks.

If it's not news that U.S. allies are providing pro-Al Qaeda forces with U.S.-made equipment, why is *CNN* pretending that it is? One reason is that it feels free to criticize the war and all that goes with it now that the growing human catastrophe in Yemen is turning into a major embarrassment for the U.S. Another is that criticizing the U.S. for failing to rein in its allies earns it points with viewers by making it seem tough and independent, even though the opposite is the case.

Then there's Trump, with whom *CNN* has been at war since the moment he was elected. Trump's Dec. 19 decision to withdraw

U.S. troops from Syria thus presented the network with a double win because it allowed it to rail against the pullout as “[bizarre](#)” and a “[win for Moscow](#)” while complaining at the same time about administration policy in Yemen. Trump is at fault, it seems, when he pulls out *and* when he stays in.

In either instance, *CNN* gets to ride the high horse as it blasts away at the chief executive that corporate outlets most love to hate. Maybe Elbagir should have given her exposé a different title: “Why arming homicidal maniacs is bad news in one country but OK in another.”

Daniel Lazare is the author of “The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy” (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique* and blogs about the Constitution and related matters at [Daniellazare.com](#).

PATRICK LAWRENCE: Pompeo, Pence & the Alienation of Europe

If the objective was to further isolate the U.S., the two officials could not have done a better job last week, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By [Patrick Lawrence](#)

Special to Consortium News



What a job Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did in Europe last week. If the objective was to worsen an already critical trans-Atlantic rift and further isolate the U.S., they could not have returned to Washington with a better result.

We might have to mark down this foray as among the clumsiest and most abject foreign policy failures since President Donald Trump took office two years ago.

Pence and Pompeo both spoke last Thursday at a U.S.-sponsored gathering in Warsaw supposedly focused on “peace and security in the Middle East.” That turned out to be a euphemism for recruiting the 60-plus nations in attendance into an anti-Iran alliance.

“You can’t achieve peace and stability in the Middle East without confronting Iran,” Pompeo said flatly. The only delegates this idea pleased were Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, and officials from Gulf Arab nations who share an obsession with subverting the Islamic Republic.

Pence went on to the annual security conference in Munich, where he elaborated further on a few of the Trump administration’s favored themes. Among them: The Europeans should ditch the nuclear accord with Iran, the Europeans should cut off trade with Russia, the Europeans should keep components made by Huawei and other Chinese companies out of their communications networks. The Europeans, in short, should recognize America’s global dominance and do as it does; as if it were still, say, 1954.

It is hard to imagine how an American administration can

prove time and again so out of step with 21st century realities. How could a vice-president and a secretary of state expect to sell such messages to nations plainly opposed to them?

Pounding the Anti-Iran Theme

Pompeo, who started an "Iran Action Group" after the Trump administration withdrew last year from the 2015 nuclear accord, returned repeatedly to a single theme in his Warsaw presentations. The Iranians, he said, "are a malign influence in Lebanon, in Yemen, and Syria and Iraq. The three H's—Houthis, Hamas, and Hezbollah—these are real threats."

Pence ran a mile with this thought. "At the outset of this historic conference," he said, "leaders from across the region agreed that the greatest threat to peace and security in the Middle East is the Islamic Republic of Iran." To be noted: all the "leaders from across the region" in attendance were Sunnis, except for Netanyahu. The major European allies, still furious that Washington has withdrawn from the nuclear accord, sent low-level officials and made no speeches.

The European signatories to the Iran accord knew what was coming, surely. While Pence insisted that Britain, France and Germany withdraw from the nuclear pact—"the time has come," he said—he also criticized the financing mechanism the three set up last month to circumvent the Trump administration's trade sanctions against Iran. "They call this scheme a 'special purpose vehicle,' " Pence said. "We call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran's

murderous revolutionary regime.”

There were plenty of European leaders at the security conference last weekend in Munich, where Pence used the occasion to consolidate what is beginning to look like an irreparable escalation of trans-Atlantic alienation. After renewing his attack on the Iran agreement’s European signatories, he shifted criticism to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Now under construction, this will be the second undersea pipeline connecting Gazprom, the Russian energy company, to Germany and other European markets. Last month the U.S. renewed threats to sanction German companies working on the \$11 billion project. “We cannot strengthen the West by becoming dependent on the East,” Pence said at the security conference Saturday.

These and other remarks in Munich were enough to get Angela Merkel out of her chair to deliver an unusually impassioned speech in defense of the nuclear accord, multilateral cooperation and Europe’s extensive economic relations with Russia. “Geo-strategically,” the German chancellor asserted, “Europe can’t have an interest in cutting off all relations with Russia.”

US Primacy V. Europe’s Future

Merkel’s speech goes to the core of what was most fundamentally at issue as Pompeo and Pence blundered through Europe last week. There are three questions to consider.

The most obvious of these is Washington’s continued insistence on U.S. primacy in the face of full-frontal

resistance even from longstanding allies. “Since day one, President Trump has restored American leadership on the world stage,” Pence declared in Warsaw. And in Munich: “America is stronger than ever before and America is leading on the world stage once again.”

His speeches in both cities are filled with hollow assertions such as these—each one underscoring precisely the opposite point: America is fated to continue isolating itself, a little at a time, so long as its leaders remain lost in such clouds of nostalgia.

The other two questions concern Europe and its future. Depending on how these are resolved, a more distant trans-Atlantic alliance will prove inevitable.

First, Europe must soon come to terms with its position on the western flank of the Euro-Asian landmass. Merkel was right: The European powers cannot realistically pretend that an ever-deepening interdependence with Russia is a choice. There is no choice. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, as it progresses westward, will make this clearer still.

Second, Europe must develop working accommodations with its periphery, meaning the Middle East and North Africa, for the sake of long-term stability in its neighborhood. The mass migrations from Syria, Libya and elsewhere have made this evident in the most tragic fashion possible. It is to Germany’s and France’s credit that they are now negotiating with Turkey and Russia to develop reconstruction plans for Syria that include a comprehensive political settlement.

As they do so, Washington shows no sign of lifting sanctions against Syria that have been in place for more than eight

years. It may, indeed, [impose new sanctions](#) on companies participating in reconstruction projects. In effect, this could criminalize Syria's reconstruction—making the nation another case wherein Europe and the U.S. find themselves at cross purposes.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the *International Herald Tribune*, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale). Follow him [@thefloutist](#). His web site is www.patricklawrence.us.

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The Unwritten Rule Between the US and Hizbullah

The two sides have long agreed to keep their hostilities covert, writes As`ad AbuKhalil, but Israel would like that to change.

By [As`ad AbuKhalil](#)
in Beirut



David Hale, the U.S. under secretary for political affairs, went to Beirut last week to make anti-Iranian comments, to worry publicly about the destabilizing effects of Hizbollah in the region and to make it clear that, after Lebanon's elections in May, the composition of the new cabinet, which has been taking months to form, is an American matter.

His visit, in other words, made it clear that the U.S. will continue interfering in internal Lebanese affairs.

As Hale's boss, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, talks up the strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, Hale may have been interested in reviving the Saudi local coalition in Lebanon. In the past that group was clustered under the March 14 Alliance, which came together in 2005 to oppose the regime in Syria and to push the Saudi-American-French agenda in Lebanon.

Despite the overwhelming support of Western governments, Western media and Western human rights organizations, that coalition has fallen apart. And despite the usual U.S. and Saudi intervention and funding of its constituent elements in the last election, those candidates fared poorly. Some Shi'ite candidates who received Western and Saudi support drew no more than a hundred votes, and in one case, even less than that.

Hizbollah Wins Votes

Hizbullah candidates, by contrast, did very well, proving yet again that the party has the overwhelming support of the

Shi`ite community.

Given the furor that Israel is raising over attack tunnels that it claims Hizbullah is building into its territory, it's safe to presume, that Hale's visit was made at the behest of Israel and aimed at bolstering a regional front against Hizbullah.

But that work is already complete. The Saudi-UAE alliance, have already declared Hizbullah a terrorist organization. The club of Gulf Arab despots is already aligned with the U.S. in its regional machinations.

Instead, the big problem that the U.S. faces in Lebanon is the dislike of the people. It's unpopular. Its anti-Hizbullah agenda – which is partly but not fully dictated by the Israeli lobby– puts it squarely on the side of Arab despots and Israel, both of which are widely despised in the region.

The U.S. has never considered its presence in Lebanon during the 1980s – on the side of Israeli militias notorious for committing war crimes– as an occupying force. But that is how many Lebanese saw it.

However, time has passed in that regard, at least for some. Two parties – the Amal and the Progressive Socialist Party – both had militias that fought U.S. forces. And both those parties now enjoy good relations with the U.S.

In Lebanon, the main thorn in the side of the U.S. is Hizbullah, as has been the case for decades.

Hizbullah, which is both a political party and a fighting force, officially established itself in 1985 with the

issuance of its manifesto to the world. But it was born a few years earlier, during the tumultuous and horrific events that surrounded the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when the suffering of the southern Lebanese population spawned a new wave of radicalization that was sponsored and supported by the Iranian regime.

Starting Point Conflict

Its conflict with the U.S. began in that formative period, between 1982 and 1984, when U.S. troops were stationed in Lebanon to support and uphold the rule of right-wing sectarian militias aligned with Israel. It was during that time, in 1983, that the U.S. embassy in Beirut was bombed. A few months later, a U.S. Marine compound, which included French soldiers, was bombed as well.

A long-running dispute surrounds the question of who carried out the attacks. The U.S. remains convinced that Hizbullah and that one of its key leaders – Imad Mughniyyah personally—was responsible. After the attacks the U.S. and Israel labelled Hizbullah a terrorist organization.

Hizbullah is unwavering in its declaration of the U.S. as an enemy of Lebanon and all “downtrodden people” (although the latter phrase is used less and less). But it denies attacking the barracks or embassy. It also distances itself from the Islamic Jihad Organization, which claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Despite the heated rhetoric that the two sides use against each other, the U.S. and Hizbullah have avoided direct military confrontation over the years. Instead they have fought proxy battles, from Iraq to Yemen to Syria. Even the

U.S. assassination of Imad Mughniyyah in 2008 was not—from the standpoint of the U.S. government—really a violation of the unspoken rule of direct combat since the U.S. has made it clear that it held Mughniyyah responsible for the attacks on U.S. targets in Lebanon.

The U.S. has been fully supportive of Israeli wars on Hizbullah (and on Lebanon as a whole), hoping that Israel would finish off the party.

A Turning Point

In 2006, the U.S. was unconditional in its sponsorship and support for Israel. But Hizbullah held its ground better than any Arab army that Israel had faced over the decades. The outcome for Israel, was an embarrassing retreat.

Since then, the might and skill of Hizbullah in facing Israeli occupation and aggression seem only to increase with every new war and every new confrontation. Regardless of one's assessment of Hizbullah's intervention in Syria, its fighters accumulated a unique battle experience there, along different fronts—which can only decrease Israeli confidence in its abilities vis-à-vis the party in the future round of war.

The U.S. does not want a military conflict with one of the most effective and popular militias in the Arab East. And Hizbullah does not want to add more conflicts to its plate. It is already actively engaged in regional conflicts and does not wish to start a global confrontation with the U.S.

But Israel, since its founding, has tried to make its enemies the enemies of the U.S. During the long years of the

Cold War, the Israeli propaganda machine was desperately searching the Arabic press to find statements that could be twisted to portray Israel's enemies – whether Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser; or Ba`thist leaders, or the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat – as Soviet tools.

When Nasser and the Palestine Liberation Organization were indicating their desire for good relations with the U.S., Israeli was intent on portraying them both as the sworn enemies of the U.S.

Keeping the Fight Covert

Since its invasion of the Middle East after Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. has preferred to keep its own fight with Hizbullah covert while supporting the direct Israeli war on Hizbullah.

Israel, however, after suffering that stunning defeat in July of 2006, has become increasingly intent on having the U.S. engage Hizbullah directly. This is something that has been made clear in the speeches of Israeli leaders and in the unending supply of legislation sponsored by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, targeting Hizbullah.

As the Trump administration tinkers with the idea of retreating militarily from the Middle East – despite the opposition of the war lobby – it cannot possibly welcome a war between Israel and Hizbollah that could spiral into a wider conflict and drag the U.S. into a heavier military intervention in the region.

What the U.S. wants now is to create a front to challenge Iran and its allies throughout the region. But the front

could not add to what already is a long list of sanctions against Iran and Hizbullah and the placement of their names on terrorist lists and watch lists. None of that, however, is sufficient for the occupation state of Israel. After failing to dislodge Hizbullah in one of the longest wars of its history in 2006, Israel urgently wants the U.S. to take a shot on its behalf.

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