

JOHN KIRIAKOU: Bolton's Long Goodbye

John Bolton's days as national security advisor are apparently numbered—for reasons that have all played out in the press, says John Kiriakou.

By [John Kiriakou](#)

Special to Consortium News



Everybody in America knows that Donald Trump places a premium on what he considers to be “loyalty.” You’re either with him or against him.

The White House staff has been a revolving door from virtually the start of his administration. It’s not unusual for aides to last mere weeks or months, only to then be thrown out on the street.

Trump then inevitably says something about “loyalty.”

The situation isn’t unique to just the White House political and domestic policy staff. It is just as pervasive at the National Security Council. Nobody is sacred. Remember, you’re either with him or against him. Now it’s John Bolton’s turn to find himself in a corner. I believe that his days as national security advisor are numbered—for reasons that have all played out in the press.

I’m one of those people—not at all unique in Washington—who has contacts and friends all over the political spectrum, including in the Trump Administration. After work and over drinks, they like to vent. What they are telling me privately is what other Washington insiders are [telling the conservative press](#). The White House, and especially the National Security Council, are in disarray. And Bolton will

soon be fired.

Bolton-Centric

The right-wing *Washington Examiner* reported this week that Bolton acknowledged these reports, but in a back-handed way. He said in a *Wall Street Journal* podcast that he believes five countries are spreading “lies about dysfunction in the Trump administration.” Those countries are North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, Russia, and China. That’s laughable.

What Bolton is saying is that there is a vast and incredibly well-coordinated international conspiracy that includes some of the most important countries in the world, the main purpose of which is to embarrass him. That sounds perfectly rational, right?

Of course, a *more* rational person might conclude that Bolton has done a terrible job, that the people around him have done a terrible job, that he has aired his disagreements with Trump in the media, and that the President is angry about it. That’s the more likely scenario.

Here’s what my friends are saying. Trump is concerned, like any president is near the end of his term, about his legacy. He said during the campaign that he wanted to be the president who pulled the country out of its two longest wars. He wanted to declare victory and bring the troops back from Afghanistan and Iraq. He hasn’t done that, largely at the insistence of Bolton. Here we are three years later and we’re still stuck in both of those countries.

Second, my friends say that Trump wants to end U.S. involvement in the Yemen war, but that Bolton has been

insistent that the only way to guarantee the closeness of the U.S. relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is to keep providing those countries with weapons, aerial refueling planes, and intelligence support.

Obsessed With Iran

That would explain the reason why the White House did not seek to block the recent Congressional vote on Yemen support. Bolton likely talked Trump into vetoing the resolution. Or he talked the Saudis into talking Trump into it. Still, at least in internal deliberations, Trump has said that he simply doesn't see a national security reason to keep the war going. The U.S. gets nothing out of it.

Third, the mainstream media has accused Bolton of being the reason behind the failure of Trump's second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Bolton toed a hard line, so much so that the North Korean media called him a "war monger" and a "human defect" once the summit ended.

This week Trump told reporters gathered on the White House south lawn that Kim had "kept his word" on nuclear and missile testing. This was a direct contradiction of Bolton, who had said just hours earlier that the North Koreans had reneged on their commitments to the U.S. Trump said simply, "My people think there could have been a violation. I view it differently."

Most importantly, Bolton has been famous for decades for his irrationally hard line on Iran. He has made no secret of his desire to bomb Iran into the stone age, to smash and overthrow its government, and to let the chips fall where they may. The policy makes literally no sense.

Iran is a country of 80 million people. It has an active and well-trained global intelligence service. It has a robust navy with highly-specialized “swift boats” that are active in the Persian Gulf. And it controls the vital [Strait of Hormuz](#), through which 20 percent of the world’s oil and 33 percent of its liquified natural gas flows.

Trump said just a week ago that he was willing to begin talks with the Iranians “with no preconditions.” This was a major softening of U.S. policy toward Iran and it immediately drew Bolton’s ire. Indeed, *The New York Times* [pointed out](#) that the policy directly “overruled a longtime goal of (Trump’s) national security advisor.”

All of this has made Trump angry. He’s constantly being one-upped by one of the Washington swamp monsters he promised to rid the city of. He finally seems to have come to realize that even establishment Republicans dislike and distrust John Bolton. And now he understands why.

Mick Mulvaney, Trump’s chief of staff, has very quietly and discreetly begun informal meetings with a list of a half-dozen possible replacements for Bolton. Let’s hope he finds one that he and Trump both like sooner, rather than later.

John Kiriakou is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. John became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act—a law designed to punish spies. He served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempts to oppose the Bush administration’s torture program.

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Intrigues in the Gulf Following Summits in Mecca

Saudi and UAE pressure on Qatar to embrace a tougher stance against Iran have left the Arab Gulf states divided as the U.S. builds tension with Teheran, writes Giorgio Cafiero.

By Giorgio Cafiero

Special to Consortium News



Expectedly, no major diplomatic breakthrough in the two-year Qatar crisis was achieved at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab League summits held late last month in Mecca. Yet it was widely seen as significant that Qatar sent its prime minister, who shook hands with King Salman.

Indeed, that the Saudi monarch extended an invitation to the Emir of Qatar notwithstanding the deterioration in Riyadh-Doha relations since mid-2017 highlighted the extent to which the Saudi leadership would like to shore up Arab/Islamic unity in the face a perceived Iranian threat.

Nonetheless, shortly after the summits in Mecca it became clear just how far Saudi Arabia and Qatar are from being on the same page with respect to Iran and the state of regional affairs more broadly. On June 2, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, expressed major "reservations" about the anti-Iranian statements made at the

summits. He told *Al Jazeera* that the declarations failed to “refer to a moderate policy to speak with Tehran” while embracing the Trump administration’s stance against the Islamic Republic without taking regional states’ interests into consideration.

Additionally, Qatar’s chief diplomat said that the GCC and Arab League summits ignored important Arab issues from Palestine to Libya and Yemen, while the statements made ran contrary to Doha’s interests and were made without consulting Qatar.

As illustrated by this rejection of the declarations, it is difficult to argue that much has changed in the Middle East since the summits. Unquestionably, the dynamics that fueled the crisis in Qatar’s relations with its immediate neighbors remain in play. Put simply, neither side of the row appears any closer to making concessions to the other. It was unrealistic to expect photo-ops and communiqués alone to alter such realities.

Healthy Qatar-Iran Ties

If the anti-Qatar bloc continues its siege, Doha will not want to fundamentally alter its highly pragmatic relationship with Tehran. Over the past two years, Iran has played a pivotal role in terms of enabling Qatar to circumvent the blockade. Across a host of domains such as food security, aviation, tourism, logistics, and energy exports, the Iranians provided stepped up cooperation when the crisis erupted in 2017 that contributed to Qatar’s resilience.

To be sure, as Qatar and Iran share ownership of the world’s

largest natural gas reserve, officials in Doha and Tehran have long figured out how to maintain healthy relations despite having different positions on scores of regional issues such as the Syrian civil war and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. Ever since the late 1980s and early 1990s, this has basically always been the case despite Qatar's membership in the mostly anti-Iranian GCC.

Yet the new geopolitical realities of the past two years and Doha and Tehran's increasingly shared perception of the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis as a grave threat have elevated Qatari-Iranian relations to new heights. Qatar now sees a far graver threat from Saudi Arabia and the UAE than from its Persian neighbor.

The leadership in Doha, which wholeheartedly and genuinely welcomed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)'s watershed passage in 2015, have been unsettled by the Trump administration's increasingly hawkish agenda vis-à-vis Tehran.

Much like their counterparts in Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman, officials in Qatar are alarmed by the growing room for misunderstanding to boil into a war between the US and Iran as a result of the sharp increase in tension between Washington and Tehran over the past several weeks.

Doubtlessly, given Qatar's increased reliance on Iran amid the blockade, devising strategies for maintaining good relations with Tehran while the White House intensifies its "maximum pressure" campaign is extremely difficult. Qatari officials understand that the stakes are high as the leadership in Doha also seeks to continue strengthening its

ties with Washington.

It is a safe bet that the rejection of the Mecca summits on Qatar's part will feed into the blockading states' narratives about Doha having sided with Tehran against its traditional Arab allies. Of course, Qatar's cordial relationship with Iran—along with Doha's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and the emirate's broadcasting of *Al Jazeera*—was a reason for the blockade as outlined by the 13 sweeping demands for reconciliation put forth by the Saudi/Emirati-led bloc.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will point to Doha's rejection of the communiqués from last month's meetings as supposed evidence of Qatar's refusal to support regional action against Tehran in the aftermath of recent sabotage off the UAE's east coast, for which National Security Advisor John Bolton blames Iran, and Houthi drone attacks targeting Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline.

At a time in which tensions are escalating in the region with the US flexing its muscles, the GCC is divided between those member-states supporting Trump's approach to Iranian behavior and those which were far more welcoming of Barack Obama's push for a partial-thaw in Washington-Tehran relations. Increasingly clear is that two years into the Qatar crisis the Saudi leadership simply lacks the means to unite the Arab world against Tehran.

Yet it is Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's own policies aimed at pressuring Doha into ending its support for "terrorism" and embracing a tougher stance against the Islamic Republic that have heavily contributed to these new dynamics whereby the

GCC is anything but a solid bloc.

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US ‘Emergency’ Arms Sales

The UN held a session that highlighted the humanitarian crisis in Yemen last week and the next day the White House announced a large weapons sale to the Saudi-led coalition, Thalif Deen reports.

By **Thalif Deen**

at UN Headquarters

Inter Press Service



When the UN Security Council met last week to discuss the deaths and devastation caused to civilians in ongoing military conflicts and civil wars, the killings in Yemen and the air attacks on hospitals, schools, mosques, and market places – whether deliberate or otherwise – were singled out as the worst ever.

The death and destruction were caused by weapons provided by some of the permanent members of the Security Council, including the U.S., France and U.K.

The day after that meeting – in defiance of U.S. congressional opposition to arms sales to some of the warring Middle Eastern nations – the [Trump administration](#) [said](#) it would sell \$8.1 billion in American arms to Jordan,

the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia under an “emergency notification.”

All three countries are part of a Saudi-led coalition unleashing attacks on Yemen in order to battle Houthi insurgents who U.S. officials claim are trained and armed by Iran. The new weapons systems are expected to add more fire power to the coalition. One of arguments adduced by the Trump administration is that increasing arms sales to Middle Eastern allies are meant to counter an “anticipated Iranian aggression.”

Stephen Zunes, professor of politics at the University of San Francisco with a specialty in Middle Eastern studies, told IPS this sale is not about deterring Iranian aggression and it is certainly not an emergency. “It’s about the profits of American arms manufacturers at the expense of countless Yemeni lives.”

Arms to Dictatorships

Zunes continued, “This is but the most extreme manifestation, however, of a longstanding bipartisan policy of transferring deadly and sophisticated armaments to the family dictatorships in the Middle East.”

Zunes, who also serves as a senior policy analyst for the Foreign Policy in Focus project of the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, said it was ironic that a nation that emerged in revolution against monarchy, would be the world’s No. 1 arms supplier of absolute monarchies today.

Lawmakers may try to block the sale, The Hill reported May

29.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council on May 23 that civilians continue to make up the vast majority of casualties in conflict, with more than 22,800 civilians dying or being injured in 2018 in just six countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. He stressed the need for the Security Council to do more to enhance compliance with the laws of war.

Amnesty Statement

Last week, the London-based Amnesty International ridiculed the U.S. argument that some of the weapons supplied to the Saudi-led coalition were “precision-guided” to avoid civilian casualties.

“The great military powers cynically boast about ‘precision’ warfare and ‘surgical’ strikes that distinguish between fighters and civilians. But the reality on the ground is that civilians are routinely targeted where they live, work, study, worship and seek medical care,” Amnesty’s statement said. “Parties to armed conflict unlawfully kill, maim and forcibly displace millions of civilians while world leaders shirk their responsibility and turn their backs on war crimes and immense suffering.”

Philippe Nassif, advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International, told IPS that President Donald Trump’s decision to circumvent Congress and authorize billions of dollars’ worth of arms sales to serial human rights abusers Saudi Arabia and the UAE is extremely unfortunate and reckless. “Both these countries have used U.S.- made weapons to commit war crimes in Yemen, a country

mired in conflict that has been made worse by the conduct of the UAE and Saudi led coalition,” he added.

Nassif pointed out that the atrocious human rights records of these governments – where executions, extrajudicial killings, mass incarceration, torture and indefinite detentions are part of daily life – is made worse by the U.S. continuing to arm them.

“Now that the UAE and Saudi Arabia will receive new American weapons, we can expect a continuation of the hell that has been brought upon Yemen, where 11 million people are suffering from famine, hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and thousands killed,” Nassif said. “We can also expect weapons to fall into the wrong hands, such as Al Qaeda, or be sent to other conflict zones where the Saudi’s and UAE are backing ascending autocrats, such as Hafar in Libya.”

Pompeo’s Determination

In a May 24 statement, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said “I made a determination pursuant to section 36 of the Arms Export Control Act and directed the Department to complete immediately the formal notification of 22 pending arms transfers to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia totaling approximately \$8.1 billion to deter Iranian aggression and build partner self-defense capacity.”

“These sales will support our allies, enhance Middle East stability, and help these nations to deter and defend themselves from the Islamic Republic of Iran,” he said.

Delaying this shipment, Pompeo argued, could degrade systems and create severe airworthiness and interoperability concerns for key partners, during a time of increasing regional volatility. He said that national security concerns have been exacerbated by many months of congressional delay in addressing these critical requirements, "and have called into doubt our reliability as a provider of defense capabilities, opening opportunities for U.S. adversaries to exploit."

The equipment to the three countries includes aircraft support maintenance; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); munitions; and other supplies.

"Today's action will quickly augment our partners' capacity to provide for their own self-defense and reinforce recent changes to U.S. posture in the region to deter Iran. I intend for this determination to be a one-time event," Pompeo added.

He pointed out that Section 36 is a long-recognized authority and has been utilized by at least four previous administrations since 1979, including Presidents Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter.

"This specific measure does not alter our long-standing arms transfer review process with Congress. I look forward to continuing to work with Congress to develop prudent measures to advance and protect U.S. national security interests in the region," he said. "The United States is, and must remain, a reliable security partner to our allies and partners around the world. These partnerships are a cornerstone of our National Security Strategy, which this

decision reaffirms.”

This article was first published by Inter Press Service. The author, [Thalif Deen](mailto:thalifdeen@ips.org), can be contacted at thalifdeen@ips.org.

British Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Secret History of Self Interest

The idea that Westminster is the “mother of all parliaments,” representing a democratic model for the world, is a cultivated myth, writes Mark Curtis.

By [Mark Curtis](#)

[British Foreign Policy Declassified](#)



On Tuesday in the British parliament, Labour’s shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry asked an urgent question relating to allegations that British troops have been covertly fighting in Yemen and supporting the Saudi-led coalition.

As [reported](#) in the *Mail* on Sunday, five British special forces troops from the elite Special Boat Service (SBS) were injured while “advising” Saudi Arabia on their deadly campaign in Yemen.

The commandos were injured in gun fights as part of a top-secret campaign, and other reports have claimed British troops have been killed in such battles. British soldiers from the Special Air Service (SAS) have [reportedly](#) been secretly deployed and operate “dressed in Arab clothing.”

Responding to Labour’s questions, Mark Field, a minister in

the U.K.'s foreign office, said that he would seek to get to the bottom of these "very serious and well sourced" allegations.

The presence of British soldiers in Yemen, secretly fighting a war that has brought death, famine and destruction to millions of innocent civilians, raises an age-old question: why does British foreign policy in the Middle East support dictatorships, abuse human rights and prioritize Britain's power status?

It's tempting to say the reasons are simply geopolitics, oil and other commercial interests. But there is a deeper explanation: Britain, far from being a true democracy, is in reality an oligarchy that promotes the interests of a privileged domestic elite. The idea that Westminster is the "mother of all parliaments," representing a democratic model for the world, is a cultivated myth.

An Elite Few

The U.K. has elections every five years, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech and association, and strong laws protecting the equality of all citizens and civil liberties. Yet real power rests in the hands of an elite few who control policy-making institutions and the dominant ideas in society.

British foreign policy-making is so centralized that it is akin to an authoritarian regime. A prime minister can send troops into action without even consulting parliament.

Britain is currently fighting several covert wars with no parliamentary authorization or debate. Away from Yemen,

special forces are operating on the ground in Syria, despite parliament only having approved air strikes against the Islamic State (IS) group. The British covert war in Syria has been going on since 2011, with almost no discussion by elected MPs.

In 1976, Lord Hailsham famously termed the U.K. an “elective dictatorship” because parliament is easily dominated by the government of the day and faces few constraints on its power. But this was before former prime minister Margaret Thatcher centralized decision-making still further, regularly bypassing the cabinet and relying on a small set of advisers – a strategy continued by Tony Blair, leading to the disastrous invasion of Iraq.

While the government is saying it will look into the role the British military is playing in Yemen, the stock response to parliamentary questions on U.K. covert action tends to be: “For reasons of national security, it is the longstanding policy of successive British governments not to comment on intelligence and sensitive operations.”

Even minor information is withheld on “sensitive” subjects: when MP Alex Sobel asked the government last month how much the U.S. reimburses Britain for the costs of the defense ministry police at the spy base at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire, a government minister refused to say.

Even when asked parliamentary questions on overt foreign policy, ministerial responses tend to be minimalist, and are often misleading or deceitful. Anyone who has made a Freedom of Information request to the government will know that they are routinely denied on the pretext of protecting “national

security.”

Operating with Impunity

Neither Blair nor former Prime Minister David Cameron has been held to account for the disastrous wars in Iraq or Libya. The British political system is so extreme that no minister has, to my knowledge, been held to account for crimes abroad – despite numerous wars, covert operations, coups and involvement in human rights abuses.

In Yemen, the U.K.-supported Saudi military has for four years been engaged in war crimes, over which British ministers have acted with impunity.

Government policies are meant to be scrutinized by all-party parliamentary committees, but they rarely hold the government to account. They tend to be packed with government supporters who fail to investigate key policies or grill ministers.

In the U.K.’s “mainstream” media, many key British foreign policies are not covered at all. There are perilously few articles reporting the extent of U.K. support for Israel or the Sisi regime in Egypt.

Even the war in Yemen has been little scrutinized; there is criticism of U.K. arms exports, but little if any mention of the air force maintaining Saudi warplanes and storing and issuing the bombs for their use. The *Mail’s* Sunday report on covert British action in Yemen is a revelation partly because such coverage is so infrequent.

Although mainstream articles do reveal aspects of U.K. foreign policy, it is more typical for reporting and

commentary to amplify the policies of the state or to spread disinformation. False assumptions pervade the media, such as that U.K. policy in the Middle East is based on support for democracy and human rights.

The 1953 Anglo-American coup in Iran was about maintaining the interests of oil firms – in Britain's case, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Corporation, the forerunner of BP. Fifty years later, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was also mainly about oil, as was the 2011 war in Libya.

The U.K.'s support of Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi regime appears to be mainly about oil and gas interests in the country. The special relationship with Saudi Arabia seeks to promote BAE Systems and other large arms corporations.

The extensive revolving door of personnel between government and corporations plays a key role in ensuring that elite interests are aligned. David Omand, the former GCHQ director, went on to work for the arms corporation Babcock; General David Richards, the former army chief of staff, was tapped to chair the U.K. advisory board of the U.S. arms corporation DynCorp; and John Sawers, the former director of MI6, was appointed a non-executive director of BP, among other examples.

Private Club

In some ways, Britain resembles more a private club than a country. As author Adam Ramsay has noted, only five British universities have produced a prime minister, and more than twice as many have gone to Eton as to non-fee paying schools.

It is striking that there have been so few whistle-blowers revealing secrets about U.K. foreign policy. This is probably because those allowed access to the elite normally come from the same circles and can be relied on to be one of the chaps forever.

The very top of the U.K.'s privilege system – members of the royal family – are regularly deployed by the foreign office and ministry of defense to support U.K. policy and military interests abroad.

Royal visits help to build relations with key regimes and sell more arms to the Middle East. The system is built on patronage, highlighted by the House of Lords, a medieval anachronism that is packed full of appointees of the government.

There are few signs that British oligarchy will change anytime soon. The “permanent government” in Whitehall is deeply entrenched. The main challenger to traditional U.K. foreign policies – Jeremy Corbyn – is being attacked and undermined on all sides. But it is not clear that even Corbyn intends to challenge British oligarchy.

There is a real need for a transformation away from centralized, unaccountable governance to a system that is much more participatory, and where citizens are informed and empowered, something that would change both domestic and foreign policies. This would benefit not only Britons, but the Middle Easterners on the receiving end of British policies.

Mark Curtis is an historian and analyst of U.K. foreign policy and international development and the author of six

books, the latest being an updated edition of “Secret Affairs: Britain’s CollU.S. ion with Radical Islam.”

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Royal Wedding Got Triple the Media Coverage of Yemen in 2018

That ratio is symptomatic of negative trends at the major networks, writes Jim Lobe.

By [Jim Lobe](#)

[Inter Press Service](#)



The ongoing war in Yemen, called the world’s “worst humanitarian disaster” by the United Nations and independent aid agencies since early last year, received a grand combined total of 20 minutes of coverage on the ABC, NBC, and CBS weekday evening news programs in 2018.

That compared to a total of 71 minutes that the three major networks devoted to the British royal wedding and a combined total of 100 minutes dedicated to the rescue of a dozen young cave explorers from flooding in Thailand, according to the latest annual compilation by the [authoritative Tyndall Report](#).

By contrast, the brutal murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in September received a total of 116 minutes of coverage by the

three networks, making it one of the very few foreign-based stories to make it into the top 20 most-covered network news events in 2018.

Although the Thai cave rescue was clearly a dramatic, emotional and easily accessible story of the kind that lends itself very well to television news, the number of lives at stake were a tiny fraction of those estimated to have been killed in Yemen (50,000-80,000 combatants and non-combatants), not to mention the deaths of well over 100,000 more civilians, including at least 80,000 children under the age of 5 who have succumbed to malnutrition or disease.

The lack of coverage of the Yemen disaster is symptomatic of negative trends regarding foreign news coverage by the major networks, which together remain the biggest single source of international news in the United States

Some 360,000 children there are currently suffering from severe acute malnutrition, while some 20 million Yemenis are unable to “reliably feed themselves or their families [and] almost 10 million are just one step away from famine,” UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said last week. The latter figure amounts to nearly half the population of the Arab world’s poorest nation.

Falling Foreign Coverage

Overall, the lack of coverage of the Yemen disaster is symptomatic of negative trends regarding foreign news coverage by the major networks, which together remain the biggest single source of international news in the United States. An average of more than 22 million households tune into the nightly newscasts, or about four times the number

of those that watch any of the three major cable channels—Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN—on a given evening.

Indeed, this year’s Tyndall Report found that network coverage from overseas fell to the lowest point since its publisher, Andrew Tyndall, began systematically tracking and coding the three weeknight newscasts in 1988. Altogether, foreign datelines accounted for only 7.5 percent of all the news generated by those programs (1,092 minutes out of 14,354 minutes) in 2018. (Each half-hour newscast contains an average of roughly 22 minutes of news content.)

“Foreign bureaus have never been so little used,” noted Tyndall in his latest report. “2018 marked a general abdication of the traditional role of the nightly newscasts, which used to provide a daily summary of major national and international news developments,” he told LobeLog in an email.

“Of particular note,” he added, “the top 30 foreign news stories [covered by the three networks’ newscasts] contained no mention of the two major western hemisphere elections—in Brazil and Mexico—and none of the major crisis in Europe; namely Brexit.”

Moreover, he wrote in his email,

the overarching international crisis facing the globe as a whole —climate change — was little covered as such, although its symptoms such as wildfires and hurricanes were presented prominently. These symptoms were confined to their domestic occurrence, however, rather than the manifestations of climate change on a global scale.

I am very pessimistic about the nightly newscasts reforming themselves and ever reverting to their traditional global mission.

Precisely because of its unparalleled reach and the influence of its major sponsors (compared to cable news advertisers), network news has always been designed to appeal to the greatest number of viewers. In important ways, the network news agenda – as shallow, superficial, sensationalistic, and increasingly inward as it is – reveals how Americans see and understand events and trends overseas.

What Did and Didn't Get Attention

The single most network-covered story of the year, according to Tyndall's tally, was the nomination and confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh at 426 minutes, followed by the ongoing probes into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election (332 minutes).

Three of the next four biggest stories involved extreme weather and its consequences – the California wildfires (242), severe winter weather (234), and Hurricane Florence in the Carolinas (203). Hurricane Michael in Florida was the 11th biggest story (134 minutes). But, as in past years, these reports, totaling over 800 minutes, were focused almost exclusively on the anticipation and immediate impact of these events rather than the possible relationship between them and climate change.

Aside from the Russian investigations, North Korean-U.S. summitry was the top foreign-policy story, clocking in at 212 minutes, making it the year's fifth-biggest story

overall. The detention of migrant children (189) ranked seventh, tied with the Parkland High School mass shooting in Florida, which was followed in turn by coverage of school safety and violence prevention more generally (184). The prosecution of President Trump's lawyer, Michael Cohen, (164) ranked 10th, the winding down of the campaign against the Islamic State in Syria (133) ranked 12th, followed by coverage of the flu season (130) and accusations of partisan bias by the FBI and Khashoggi's assassination (116 minutes each). Police killings of civilians and the federal budget and deficit (112 each), followed by the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics (111), the Facebook controversy (107), and coverage of the Christmas holiday season (105), rounded out the top 20.

As for foreign stories, all things Russia-related – including the alleged election interference (332), U.S.-Russia diplomacy including the Helsinki summit (92); Russian-British diplomacy and the poisoning of the Russian ex-spy (54); and U.S.-Russian spy-related events (23) – led the pack with a total of 501 minutes, or a little over 3 percent of total nightly newscasts.

Immigration-related coverage accounted for nearly the same amount of coverage (493 minutes). It included the detention of migrant children (189), border restrictions and “the wall” (96), immigration reform more generally (75), Central American migrants and caravans (50), DACA Dreamers seeking permanent status (36), crackdowns on undocumented immigrants and deportations (27), and asylum-seekers (20).

The Koreas were the top foreign-policy story: In addition to the 212 minutes devoted to the summit between President

Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, inter-Korean diplomacy accounted for 48 minutes, and North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs for another 42 minutes, bringing the total to just over 300 minutes (or about 2 percent of total programming), not counting the 111 minutes on the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

The Syrian civil war and Trump's (now-modified) decision to withdraw U.S. troops were the next most-covered foreign-related stories (133), followed by Khashoggi's assassination (116), the cave rescue in Thailand (100), the royal wedding (71), ongoing fighting in Afghanistan (54), U.S.-China trade frictions (52), and steel and aluminum import tariffs (37).

The Israel-Palestinian conflict, NATO-U.S. diplomacy (notably Trump's trip to Brussels), and the Iran nuclear deal, including Washington's withdrawal from it, each earned a grand total of 29 minutes of coverage by the three networks, while the earthquake in Indonesia (26) and the eruption of the volcano in Guatemala (23) gained more than Yemen's 20 minutes in the network spotlight, one minute more than was devoted to Trump's quick visit to London and the Lion Air jet crash (19 minutes each).

Hopes among various humanitarian, human-rights, and peace groups that the media's strong focus on Khashoggi's killing would draw greater public attention to the catastrophic toll suffered by the civilian population during the 4-year-old Saudi-led campaign against Houthi rebels and their allies in Yemen seem to have been disappointed, according to Tyndall's findings. Of the total 20 minutes devoted to Yemen in 2018, 13 minutes preceded the Saudi journalist's death and only seven minutes followed it. The relatively greater (but still

pathetic) amount of attention before the September assassination came mostly as a result of dire warnings issued by the UN earlier in the spring. (Of the 20 minutes, CBS accounted for 11, while NBC and ABC split the remainder.)

The lack of media attention to Yemen post-Khashoggi, however, did not translate into congressional indifference. Motivated in major part by a campaign led by the *Post* itself (as well as other print media), Congress expressed its anger by taking up a series of resolutions that have gained momentum this year to curb U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.

America's Worldview

If the network evening news provides as good a measure as any of how Americans perceive the world outside U.S. borders, it's not a great picture. As noted by Tyndall himself, South America and sub-Saharan Africa, with a combined population of nearly 2 billion, simply failed to register in the news. The rise of authoritarian movements in Europe also appeared to draw a blank, as did South and Southeast Asia (apart from the cave rescue).

And, despite the multi-trillion-dollar commitment by the United States to stabilizing and securing the Middle East region over the last two decades, there wasn't much evidence of its existence on network television besides the last throes of the campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and the Khashoggi killing. Iraq, to which Washington has sent well over a million troops since the 2003 invasion, didn't even make the top 30 foreign stories in 2018.

Both Israel and Iran can probably take some satisfaction from their relatively small media footprint last year. The increasingly bellicose fulminations from Trump, National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo against Tehran are unlikely to get much popular backing – let alone public enthusiasm for a new military conflict in the Middle East – in the absence of far more intense (and negative) coverage of the kind that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been getting since the Khashoggi murder.

Israel, too, can be happy with its relative obscurity. Despite the hundreds of casualties inflicted by Israeli bullets on Palestinian demonstrators along the Gaza border last year, coverage of Israel-Palestine actually fell by nearly 50 percent, from the 42 minutes the networks devoted to the conflict in 2017, which was already a record low, to a mere 29, according to Tyndall's calculations over the previous 30 years.

This piece was [originally published](#) in Jim Lobe's blog on U.S. foreign policy [Lobellog.com](#)

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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.”

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