

# Vietnam and the U.S. 'Forever Wars'

Military planners have learned the wrong lessons from the Vietnam War, focusing on war's "winnability" rather than questioning whether to engage in it all, notes Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Setting aside for the moment President Donald Trump's animus to Barack Obama and all his works (notably the JCPOA, AKA the Iran nuclear deal), and his close attachment to Benjamin Netanyahu, much of this administration's foreign policy seems to Beltway outsiders as one that is strategically incoherent: increasing U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan (after 16 years of war); a militarized 'statelet' to be constructed in northeastern Syria; a ploy to divide Lebanon; operational collaboration with Saudi's Yemen war; and 'taking Jerusalem off the table.'

These policies all seem to be conceived with a puzzling indifference to the likelihood for U.S. failure and humiliation.

Now one military historian who served with U.S. forces in Iraq tells us in a compelling discourse that if we find it confusing, it is because we have failed to grasp the essence of what drives these policies. He explains – in a single word – what it is that we're missing: Vietnam

"It's always there," Danny Sjursen writes of the Vietnam War. "Looming in the past, informing American futures. A 50-year-old war, once labelled the longest in our history, is still alive and well; and still being refought by one group of Americans: the military high command. And almost half a century later, they're still losing it and blaming others for doing so."

More than two decades of involvement, spanning from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s and – at the height of involvement – with half a million American troops on the ground, the basic weakness was never altered, observes Sjursen.

The U.S.-backed regime in Saigon was simply unable to hold the line without American military support – and ultimately collapsed under the weight of a conventional North Vietnamese invasion, in April 1975.

"There's just one thing," Sjursen writes. "Though a majority of historians ... subscribe to the basic contours of the above narrative, the vast majority of senior American military officers do not. Instead, they're still refighting the Vietnam War."

Many of the current military leaders entered the service when military prestige

was at an all-time low ebb. They came of age believing the Vietnam failure was due to political cowardice in Washington, or due to a military high command that too weak to assert its authority effectively. But none of the military analysis done by this post-Vietnam generation of officers ever addressed the basic question “about whether the Vietnam War was winnable, necessary, or advisable” from the beginning.

No, in this view, the war could, and should, have been won – if only the right approach had been pursued.

Thus, we have had “forever war” which is designed empirically to “prove” the two major military theses of the war lacunae – which if they had been properly implemented in Vietnam, instead of being neglected – would assuredly have led to an American “win.”

This revisionist history began in 1986 with an article by David Petraeus in the military journal *Parameters*, in which he argued that the U.S. army was unprepared to fight low intensity conflicts (such as Vietnam), and that “what the country needed wasn’t fewer Vietnams; but better-fought ones. The next time, he concluded fatefully, the military should do a far better job of implementing counterinsurgency forces, equipment, tactics, and doctrine to win such wars.”

One strand of military analysis (the Clausewitzian, “go-big” hypothesis), about how to “win” next time, was initiated by a Colonel Harry Summers, who suggested that “civilian policymakers had lost the war by focusing hopelessly on the insurgency in South Vietnam rather than focus on the North Vietnamese capital, Hanoi: More troops, more aggressiveness, even full-scale invasions of communist safe havens in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, would have led to victory.”

Though H.R. McMaster (the present National Security Advisor) in a 1997 book, *Dereliction of Duty*, pinned the blame rather on the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a lack of honesty in advising the President Johnson on what was needed to “win,” he agreed with Summers that “winning” required a more aggressive offensive strategy – a full ground invasion of the North, or unrelenting carpet-bombing of that country.

In this sense, he was another “go-big” Clausewitzian – and we may recognize something of this earlier intellectual framing in McMaster’s attempt in April 2017 to persuade President Trump to deploy 150,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan, as a Petraeus-style “surge.” It will be recalled also, that McMaster reportedly is the advocate for a more aggressive, military-options approach for North Korea.

The other strand – the lack of a COIN, or counterinsurgency, approach in Vietnam – was initially adopted by Colonel Krepinevich as the overarching explanation for the US military's Vietnam failure. The definitive COIN doctrine, Field Service Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency Operations, however, was overseen by David Petraeus, working with another officer, Lt. General James Mattis (the present Defense Secretary).

Petraeus would “famously return to Iraq in 2007,” Tom Engelhardt notes, “that manual in hand, with five brigades, or 20,000 U.S. troops, for what would become known as ‘the surge,’ or “the new way forward” – an attempt to bail the Bush administration out of its disastrous occupation of the country.”

“Such revisionist interpretations of the Vietnam experience would prove tragic in Iraq and Afghanistan, once they had filtered down to the entire officer corps,” Sjursen reflects. “All of this misremembering, all of those Vietnam ‘lessons’ inform the U.S. military’s ongoing ‘surges’ and ‘advise-and-assist’ approaches to its wars in the Greater Middle East and Africa.”

Both Vietnam revisionist schools are represented in the Trump administration and guide its version of global strategy. There are those who demand a freer hand in waging war than they had in Vietnam and there is a “hearts-and-minds” faction that consists of officers who have spent three administrations expanding COIN-influenced missions to more than two-thirds of the world’s nations. “Today’s leaders don’t even pretend that the post-9/11 wars will ever end,” notes Sjursen.

In an interview last June, Petraeus described the Afghan conflict as “generational,” raising the specter of a decades-long engagement. Speaking on PBS’ News Hour, Petraeus said:

“But this [war in Afghanistan] is a generational struggle. This is not something that is going to be won in a few years. We’re not going to take a hill, plant a flag, [and] go home to a victory parade. And we need to be there for the long haul, but in a way that is, again, sustainable. We have been in Korea for 65-plus years because there is an important national interest for that. We were in Europe for a very long period of time: Still there, of course, and actually with a renewed emphasis now, given Russia’s aggressive actions. And I think that’s the way we need to approach this.”

The analysis by Sjursen helps explain what otherwise seems to be ill-conceived actions by the US military, such as militarily to occupy (i.e. illegally) a corner of Syria (well, 40% of it really). War with Russia and Iran, it would appear, are “forever” wars – generational struggles. China is too, but that is a financial war front, principally.

McMaster said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in May 2016: “What is required to deter a strong nation ... is forward deterrence, to be able to ratchet up the cost at the frontier, and to take an approach to deterrence that is consistent with deterrence by denial, convincing your enemy that your enemy is unable to accomplish his objectives at a reasonable cost.”

That is perhaps what America’s annexation of northeastern Syria is all about: ratchetting up the cost, at the frontier; a deterrence by denial (of Syrian land to Iranian forces).

Europe might like to ponder McMaster’s words. For if the U.S is engaged in “generational,” COIN-influenced operations against Iran, the Europeans are fighting the wrong war: Trying to appease Trump, by setting up a working group with the Americans to consider how the JCPOA can be improved, or entering into talks on ballistic missiles with Iran, is likely to achieve nothing: it will be simply subsumed into what McMaster described as the US needing to operate effectively on this “battleground of perception and information.”

That is to say the Europeans will be colluding with the U.S. COIN operations being mounted against Iran.

What is less clear however, about “what’s up” with U.S. foreign policy, is this: At the 2016 CSIS event, McMaster described Russia’s “invasion” of Ukraine and its “annexation” of Crimea as having “punctuated” the end of the post-Cold War period, but that these were not new developments “in terms of Russian aggression.”

“Of course, this is a sophisticated strategy, what Russia is employing – and we’re doing a study of this now with a number of partners – that combines, really, conventional forces as cover for unconventional action, but a much more sophisticated campaign involving the use of criminality and organized crime, and really operating effectively on this battleground of perception and information, and in particular part of a broader effort to sow doubt and conspiracy theories across our alliance,” McMaster outlined.

“And this effort,” he continued, “is aimed really not at defensive objectives, but at offensive objectives – to collapse the post-World War II, certainly the post-Cold War, security, economic, and political order in Europe, and replace that order with something that is more sympathetic to Russian interests.”

This is frankly psychotic. It reminds of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, in which the revolutionaries fearing for the soul of Russia (read America), believe that, unless the perceived threats to her are exorcised by a renewal of vigor and a pure nationalism, their country would be overwhelmed. It is a study in

the fragmentation of human psyche which leads the group to see everything conspiring together, to destroy what they see to be the true soul of their homeland.

McMaster's view is presented as if America is the threatened, fragile psyche – under evil attack from all quarters. There seems to be no understanding that these fears might be largely the projections from his own psyche (as in Dostoevsky's analysis), or that American military actions might have contributed anything to towards these antagonisms that he now identifies as threatening him, and his country; or that the dissolution of the American-shaped global order or America's dominance over the global financial system, may represent changing major underlying dynamics, that are occurring in, and of, themselves and not connected directly to Russia.

**Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.**

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## Trump’s Saudi Scheme Unravels

President Trump and his son-in-law bet that the young Saudi crown prince could execute a plan to reshape the Mideast, but the scheme quickly unraveled revealing a dangerous amateur hour, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Aaron Miller and Richard Sokolsky, writing in *Foreign Policy*, suggest “that Mohammed bin Salman’s most notable success abroad may well be the wooing and capture of President Donald Trump, and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.” Indeed, it is possible that this “success” may prove to be MbS’ only success.

“It didn’t take much convincing”, Miller and Sokolski wrote: “Above all, the new bromance reflected a timely coincidence of strategic imperatives.”

Trump, as ever, was eager to distance himself from President Obama and all his works; the Saudis, meanwhile, were determined to exploit Trump’s visceral antipathy for Iran – in order to reverse the string of recent defeats suffered by the kingdom.

So compelling seemed the prize (that MbS seemed to promise) of killing *three* birds with one stone (striking at Iran; “normalizing” Israel in the Arab world, and a Palestinian accord), that the U.S. President restricted the details to family channels alone. He thus was delivering a deliberate slight to the U.S. foreign policy and defense establishments by leaving official channels in the dark, and guessing. Trump bet heavily on MbS, and on Jared Kushner as his intermediary. But MbS’ grand plan fell apart at its first hurdle: the attempt to instigate a provocation against Hezbollah in Lebanon, to which the latter would overreact and give Israel and the “Sunni Alliance” the expected pretext to act forcefully against Hezbollah and Iran.

Stage One simply sank into soap opera with the bizarre hijacking of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri by MbS, which served only to unite the Lebanese,

rather than dividing them into warring factions, as was hoped.

But the debacle in Lebanon carries a much greater import than just a mishandled soap opera. The really important fact uncovered by the recent MbS mishap is that not only did the “dog not bark in the night” – but that the Israelis have no intention “to bark” at all: which is to say, to take on the role (as veteran Israeli correspondent Ben Caspit, a columnist for Al Monitor, put it), of being “the stick, with which Sunni leaders threaten their mortal enemies, the Shiites ... right now, no one in Israel, least of all Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is in any hurry to ignite the northern front. Doing so, would mean getting *sucked into the gates of hell*” (emphasis added).

### **The Syrian Defeat**

Let us be clear, the so-called Sunni Alliance (principally Saudi Arabia and UAE, with Egypt already backing off) has just been roundly defeated in Syria. It has no capability whatsoever to “roll-back” Iran, Hezbollah or the Iraqi PMU (a Shiite militia) – *except* by using the Israeli “stick.” Israel may have the same strategic interests as the Sunni Alliance, but as Caspit notes, “the Saudis are interested in having Israel do the dirty work for them. But as it turns out, not everyone in Israel is as excited about it.”

Caspit calls a prospective clash between the Sunni Alliance and the Iranian-led front “a veritable war of Armageddon.” Those words encapsulate Israeli reservations.

This refusal to “bark” (in the famous Conan Doyle account of Sherlock Holmes) somehow knocks the blocks out from under Kushner’s “grand plan” because if Israel is opting out, what is there left to talk about? Israel precisely was the “stick” in Trump’s plan too. No stick: no Sunni Alliance roll-back of Iran; no further Saudi normalization with Israel; no Israeli-Palestinian initiative. MbS’ clumsiness (“reckless[ness]” a US official has called it) has pulled the rug out from under U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Why did Trump gamble so heavily on the inexperienced Kushner and the impulsive MbS? Well, of course, if such a “grand plan” had indeed worked out, it would have been a major foreign policy coup – and one done over the heads of the professional foreign policy and defense echelon who were excluded from it. Trump then would have felt himself freer to ascend above the Establishment tentacles: to attain a certain elevated independence and freedom from his “minders.” He would have achieved his coup through family channels, rather than be officially advised.

But, if it sinks into farce, and MbS becomes regarded in the U.S. as a maverick,

rather than a Machiavelli, the (slighted) “system” will exact its revenge: presidential judgments will stand devalued – and ever more in need of justification and “minding.”

MbS (and Kushner) may have hurt President Trump in a much wider way therefore: the failed bet on the untried MbS may leach into other spheres – such as, in consequence, U.S. allies’ openly questioning the soundness of Trump’s North Korea judgments. In short, the U.S. President’s credibility will bear the consequences for his falling for MbS’ spin.

### **Wishful Thinking**

There is, to be fair, much that is fanciful (even sycophantic) in the Western treatment of Saudi Arabia (President Trump is not alone in his thrall of things Saudi): the very notion of Saudi Arabia transforming itself into some muscular, “modern” regional powerhouse that can stare down Iran, in itself, would seem a tad unrealistic, yet this is widely accepted among U.S. commentators. Yes, the kingdom has little alternative but to transform as its oil dividend approaches expiry, and that may well mean, in theory, wrenching the kingdom onto a new course.

But defining exactly how the kingdom can re-invent itself, without tearing itself apart, is likely to be much more complex than advocating some superficial embrace of “Western modernity,” or that of combatting “corruption.” These are red herrings: the family *is* the state; and the state (and its oil wealth) is the family’s. There is no boundary, or demarcated frontier, between state and family. The latter enjoy the *privileges and perquisites* of birth (depending on proximity, or distance, from the throne). And perquisites awarded or appropriated, reflect only the monarch’s power-needs that serve to sustain his absolutism. There is no “damned merit” or equity in this system, nor was it ever intended.

What then can the term “corruption” mean in such a system? Saudi Arabia does not even pretend to a level, rules-based playing field. The law (and the rules) simply are what the king says, or signs, day-to-day.

What “corruption” used to mean, when Europe earlier “enjoyed” such a similar absolutist system, was clear enough: you had got in the king’s way, that is all that “corruption” implied. So, if the outside world thinks that MbS is moving Saudi Arabia towards a *Western modernity*, then they must mean either that MbS is planning the jettisoning of “the family” (the 15,000 princes of the blood royal), or he’s moving towards some constitutional monarchial set-up, and a

rules-based society of citizens, rather than subjects.

Nothing in MbS' *actions* suggest that he is moving in that direction. Rather, his actions suggest that he wants to recover and restore the *absolutist aspect* to the monarchy. And the modernity that he is seeking is of the type that you *buy*, virtually ready-made, ready to be assembled from its box. In short, the plan is *to buy* an industrial base, "in a box," off the shelf, to make up for depleting oil revenues.

Vision 2030 tells us that this well-packaged, high-tech, "industrial base" is supposed to yield \$1 trillion's profit per annum, if all goes well ... eventually. That is to say, it is intended as replacement source of income: precisely to support "the family" – and not displace it. It is not therefore "reformist" in the Western notion of modernity being "equality before the law" and of protected rights.

### **Unrealistic Hopes**

Well, this type of non-organic, high-speed industrialization is not so easy to graft into society (if you are not Josef Stalin). It is expensive and, as history also tells us, is socially and culturally disruptive. It will cost a lot more than the reported \$800 billion which MbS hopes to "recover" from his detainees (through physical coercion – some 17 have been already been hospitalized, in consequence of their treatment in detention).

But, if it is not to Westernize the economy, why then are so many senior family members needing to be "got out of the way"? This part of the "grand plan" relates perhaps, to the reason why MbS wanted, so much, to "woo and capture" President Trump (as Miller and Solkosky put it). MbS is frank about this: he has been telling President Trump that he wants to restore the kingdom's former grandeur; to be again the leader of the Sunni world, and the guardian of Islam. And to do that, upstart Iran and the Shi'i revival must be knocked back down into subordination to Saudi leadership.

The difficulty is that some in the family would have opposed such adventurism against Iran. MbS seems to be pursuing a notion similar to that adopted by the neocons: i.e. the Kristolian argument that you can't make (or restore) a "benevolent hegemony" omelet without breaking a few eggs. And as Miller and Sokolsky noted, Trump "didn't take much convincing" – MbS' vision intersected precisely with his own imperatives (and animus towards Iran). Trump duly tweeted his endorsement for the Saudi "corruption" crack-down.

And here lay the third leg to the "grand plan": Israel would be "the stick" for the Saudi-UAE-U.S. alliance against Iran (Hezbollah was to be to be its peg for

action). Saudi Arabia then, in return, would move to recognize the Jewish State, and Israel would give the Palestinians “something”: a “something” that might be called a state, even if it was much less than a state. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia would co-ordinate in pressuring the Palestinians to accept the U.S. proposals for a “settlement.”

Why did it go so wrong? Exaggerated expectations of that which each other party could realistically *implement*. Believing each other’s rhetoric. America’s love affair with Saudi royalty. Kushner’s family ties to Netanyahu. Wishful thinking on the part of Kushner and Trump that MbS could be the instrument to restore not just the Saudi kingdom as America’s “policeman” in the Islamic world, but even the American-led order in the Middle East, too.

Maybe Jared Kushner believed Bibi Netanyahu when he hinted that “normalization” of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would witness reciprocation in Israeli concessions to the Palestinians (when in fact, the Israeli security cabinet has already vetoed the concessions – well short of a state – that were being discussed in this connection)?

Maybe Jared believed MbS when he suggested that he could mobilize the Sunni world against Iran – if America and Israel backed him (when even Egypt opposed destabilizing Lebanon)?

Maybe MbS believed that Trump spoke for America when he offered to support him (when in fact, he spoke only for the White House)?

Maybe MbS thought that Trump would rally Europe against Hezbollah in Lebanon (in fact, the Europeans have prioritized Lebanese stability)?

And, maybe MbS and Kushner thought Netanyahu spoke for Israel when he promised to be a partner in the front against Hezbollah and Iran? Was it the “grand plan” that was affirmed between Netanyahu and Trump on the day before the latter launched his United Nations broadside at Iran in September? When in fact, while any Israeli Prime Minister can wage war against the Palestinians with a relatively free hand, the same is not true where the state of Israel itself is being put at stake. No Israeli P.M. can commit to a possibly existential conflict (for Israel), without having broad support from the Israeli political and security establishment. And the Israel Establishment will only contemplate war when it is plainly in the Israeli interest, and not merely to please MbS or Mr Trump.

Ben Caspit (and other Israeli commentators) confirm that the Israeli establishment does not see war with Hezbollah, and the risk of a wider conflict, to be in the Israeli interest.

The fallout from this episode is highly significant. It has exposed that Israel presently is deterred from contemplating a war in the region (as Caspit explains). It too has underlined the hollowness of MbS ambitions to mount a “Sunni Alliance” against Iran; and it has undercut President Trump’s containment policy for Iran. For now, at least, we may expect Iran and Russia to consolidate the state in Syria, and to stabilize the northern tier. Caspit’s “war of Armageddon” may yet arrive – but not for now, perhaps.

**Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.**

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## Saudi Arabia’s Desperate Gamble

Furious over defeat in Syria, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince is gambling again, arresting rivals at home and provoking a political crisis in Lebanon, but he may lack the geopolitical chips to pull off his bet, says ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It is always tempting. The Syrian war is coming to an end, and the losses to those who bet on the losing side – suddenly in the glare of the end-game – become an acute and public embarrassment. The temptation is to brush the losses aside and with a show of bravado make one last bet: the masculine “hero” risks his home and its contents on a last spin of the wheel. Those in attendance stand in awed silence, awaiting the wheel to slow, and to trickle the ball forward, slot by slot, and to observe where it comes to rest, be it on black, or on the blood-red of tragedy.

Not only in romances, but in life, too. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has wagered all on black, with his “friends” – President Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) and Trump himself daring MbS on. Trump, in his business life, once or twice has staked his future on the spin of the wheel. He too has gambled and admits to the exhilaration.

And in the shadows, at the back of the gaming room, stands Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. The idea of going to the casino was his, in the first place. If the hero lands on black, he will share in the joy, but if it is red ... never mind: Bibi’s home is not forfeit.

Let us be clear, MbS is severing all the various fetters that hold the Saudi kingdom together and intact. Saudi Arabia is not just a family business: it is also a confederation of tribes. Their diverse interests were attended to, primordially, through the composition of the National Guard, and its patronage. The latter henceforth reflects, no longer, the kingdom's diverse tribal affiliations, but the security interests of one man, who has seized it for himself.

Ditto for the various cadet branches of the al-Saud family: the carefully judged sharing out of spoils amongst the many family claimants is finished. One man is clearing the table of everybody's smaller stakes. He has snapped the wires connecting the Court to the Saudi business élite – and is slowly slicing away the Wahhabi religious establishment, too. They have been effectively kicked out of the partnership, which they founded jointly with ibn Saud, the first monarch of Saudi Arabia who ruled during the first half of the last century, also known as King Abdul Aziz. In short, no one has a stake left in this enterprise, but MbS – and no one it seems, has rights, or redress.

Why? Because MbS sees the Saudi political and religious leadership of the Arab world slipping, like sand, through the king's fingers, and he cannot bear the thought that Iran (and the despised Shi'a), could be the inheritor.

### **Transforming Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia, therefore, has to be transformed from a sleepy, declining kingdom, into an instrument for blunting Iranian power. This, naturally resonates with an American President who seems, too, more and more preoccupied with reasserting U.S. prestige, deterrence and power in the world (rather than adhering to the non-interventionist narrative of the Campaign). At *The American Conservative's* conference in Washington last week, editor Robert Merry, a staunch realist and prolific author, mourned that: "There is no realism and restraint in American foreign policy in the Trump era."

All wars are costly, and money is needed (and is being seized accordingly through MbS's arrest of his rivals on corruption charges). But Saudi Arabia traditionally (since the Eighteenth Century), has waged all its power struggles *via* one particular (and effective) tool: fired-up Wahhabi jihadism. And that, in the wake of the Syrian debacle, lies discredited, and no longer available.

So now, Saudi Arabia has to craft a new instrument, with which to confront Iran: and the Crown Prince's choice is truly ironic: "moderate Islam" and Arab nationalism (to counter non-Arab Iran and Turkey). Mohammad Abd-el Wahhab must be turning in his grave: "moderate" Islam in his rigorous doctrine, led only to idolatry (such as that practiced by the Ottomans), and which, in his view,

should be punished by death (see [here](#)).

In fact, this is the riskier part of MbS's gamble (though seizing Prince Walid bin Talal's mammoth fortune has grabbed most attention). King Abdel Aziz faced armed rebellion, and another king was assassinated for departing from the Wahhabist principles on which the state was founded – and for embracing westernized modernity (viewed by pure Wahhabis as idolatry).

The gene of Wahhabist fervor cannot be exorcised from Saudi society by simply commanding it gone. (Abdul Aziz finally only overcame it, by machine gunning its adherents, dead).

But, embracing "moderate Islam" (i.e. secular Islam), and threatening to confront Iran, probably was done with one eye on wooing President Trump to support MbS's ousting of his cousin, Prince Naif, as Crown Prince – and the other eye on the P.R. potential to portray Iran as "extremist" Islam to a White House whose world view of the Middle East has been shaped by Bibi Netanyahu whispering in the ear of Jared Kushner, and by the prejudices of a circle of advisers disposed to see Iran in terms of one singular understanding, rather than in its diverse aspects. Netanyahu must be congratulating himself on his clever ploy.

### **Netanyahu's Coup**

No doubt about it: it has been a coup for Netanyahu. The question though, is whether it will turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory, or not: whichever it is, it is highly dangerous to throw grenades into combustible material. This U.S.-Israeli-Saudi-UAE project is, at bottom, an attempt to overturn reality, no less – it is rooted in a denial of the setback suffered by these states by their multiple failures to shape a *New Middle East* in the Western mode. Now, in the wake of their failure in Syria – in which they went to the limits in search of victory – they seek another spin of the roulette wheel – in the hope of recouping all their earlier losses. It is, to say the least, a capricious hope.

On the one hand, Iran's strength across the northern Middle East is not tentative. It is now well rooted. Iran's "strategic space" includes Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen – and increasingly – Turkey. Iran has played a major role in defeating ISIS, together with Russia. It is a "strategic partner" of Russia, while Russia now enjoys broad sway across the region. In a word, the political heft lies with the north, rather than with the weakened, southern tier.

If there be some notion that Russia might be induced to "rein in" Iran and its allies across the region to mollify Israeli concerns, this smacks of wishful thinking. Even if Russia could (and it probably cannot), why should it? How then



will Iran be rolled-back? By military action? This, too, seems a stretch.

Israel's military and security echelon, in the wake of the 2006 war on Lebanon, is likely only to contemplate a war (with anyone other than Palestinians), that is short (six days or less); does not result in heavy Israeli civilian or military casualties; and can be won at a low cost. Ideally, Israel would also expect full American buy-in (unlike in 2006). The Pentagon has little appetite for putting boots on the ground again in the Middle East, and Israelis are aware of this. And Saudi Arabia alone, cannot threaten anyone militarily (as Yemen has amply demonstrated).

Can Saudi Arabia squeeze Lebanon economically and impose political pressure on any Lebanese government? Of course: but economic pressure likely will hurt the Sunni, middle and business classes, harder than the 44 percent of the Lebanese population who are Shi'a. Generally, the Lebanese have an aversion to external interference, and American sanctions and pressures will be more likely to unite Lebanon than divide it. (This is the old, old story of imposed sanctions.) And at a guess, the Europeans will neither willingly support the de-stabilization of Lebanon nor the abandonment of JCP0A, the 2015 agreement to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

So what may be the outcome? At a guess, Saudi Arabia, already a society with many repressed tensions, may simply implode under the new repression (or MbS might somehow be "removed" before the tensions combust). America and Israel will not emerge strengthened, but rather will be viewed as less relevant to the Middle East.

Robert Malley, the former Middle East adviser in the last administration, warns of the danger of a potential regional explosion: "Fear is the one thing preventing it—but could also precipitate it."

**Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.**

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## Israeli-Saudi Tandem Adjusts to Syria Loss

Facing defeat in the proxy war in Syria, the Israeli-Saudi tandem is planning a

new front against Hezbollah, presaged by Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's sudden resignation, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

It seems that matters are coming to a head in the Middle East. For many states, the coming period will likely prove to be the moment in which they determine their futures – as well as that for the region as a whole.

The immediate peg for “crunch time” is Russia's fast-track proposal of a conference to be held in Sochi, with the near-full kaleidoscope of Syrian opposition invited, which, if all goes as planned, might mean 1,000 delegates arriving in Sochi as soon as Nov. 18.

The Syrian government has agreed to attend. Of course, when one hears of attendance in these numbers, it suggests that this is not intended as a “sleeves rolled-up” working session, but rather as a meeting in which Russian thoughts will be mooted on the constitution, the system of government, and the place of “minorities” – with a chaser that Russia wants fresh elections pretty darned quick: which is to say, in six months' time. In short, this is to be the “last chance saloon” for opposition figures: come aboard now, or be shut out, in the cold.

This initiative has plenty of push behind it, including President Putin's personal endorsement, but no guarantee of success. Both Iran and Turkey (the co-guarantors of Astana) privately may have reservations, not knowing precisely what Moscow might unveil. Iran is insistent on Syria retaining a strong centralized government, and Turkey is likely to worry about whether the Kurds might receive too much from Moscow; it will also have reservations about sitting down with the YPD (Syrian Kurds), which it views to be little more than a re-branded PKK, which Turkey regards as a terrorist organization. If Turkey does pull out, it will take an important slice of the opposition with it.

Critical moments in history, however, do have a habit of proving to be less critical than first imagined, but this one effectively marks the beginning of the winding up process of the Syrian war and of the 20-year “New Middle East” project (as devised by the U.S. and Israeli governments). How each state responds, will determine the Middle East landscape for the next years.

### **Military Mop-up**

Late last week, the Syrian army took the rest of Deir Ezzor city, and with it its rear now secure, the Syrian army is free to continue the 30 or so kilometers to reach Abu Kamal (al-Bukamal) – the last ISIS urban outpost – and the vital

border crossing on the Euphrates with Iraq. It is estimated that there may be 3,500 Da'esh (another name for the Islamic State or ISIS) in Abu Kamal. But Abu Kamal's "twin" (on the Iraqi side of the border), al-Qaim, was taken by the Iraqi government's PMU militia forces on Friday. The Iraqi forces are now clearing the city of its estimated 1,500 Da'esh fighters.

The Syrian army, backed up by several thousand recently injected Hezbollah forces, is poised to enter Abu Kamal in the coming days from two directions – and from the south, a co-ordinated thrust north up and into Abu Kamal by the Iraqi Hash'd a- Sha'abi (PMU) militia, will form a pincer.

American-supported SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), however, are also trying to reach Abu Kamal from the east (the U.S., pressured by Israel, would like to seal and close the border crossing). U.S. allied forces can move more quickly, as U.S. officers are seeking to bribe local tribal leaders who formerly had sworn allegiance to ISIS (with Saudi money), to switch sides, or at least to allow the SDF forces to advance unhindered by ISIS (as happened in the environs of Deir Ezzor).

In short, the military outcome in Syria is done (after six years of war), and now comes the political bargaining. How this plays out will determine the relative strengths of the forces that will shape the Middle East in the coming years. The outcome will likely see whether Turkey can be bullied back towards NATO (by threats such as that by General Petr Pavel, head of NATO's military committee, warning of "consequences" for Turkey's attempts to buy Russian air defenses), or whether Turkey's determination to limit Kurdish aspirations will see Turkey position itself alongside Iran and Iraq (who share a common interest).

Turkey's role in Idlib, in overseeing the de-escalation zone there, remains opaque. Effectively, its forces are positioned more to control the Afrin Kurdish "canton" (rather than monitor the Idlib de-escalation zone). It is possible that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hoping to use Turkish troops to carve out a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border – in contravention to the Astana understandings. If so, this will place him at odds with both Moscow and Damascus (but will not necessarily imply a return to the NATO camp, either).

## **Syria's Future**

The bargaining at Sochi will also make clearer whether Syria will be a strong centralized state (as Iran prefers), or a looser federal state as America (and perhaps Russia) would prefer. Sochi will be something of a litmus for the extent to which American influence can shape outcomes in today's Middle East. At present, it looks as if there is co-ordination between Moscow and Washington for

a speedy political settlement in Syria, a U.S. declaration of victory over ISIS, Syrian elections, and an American exit from the Syrian theatre.

The outcome of the conference will also perhaps clarify whether the Syrian Kurds finally will remain with the U.S. CentCom project for retaining a permanent U.S. presence in northeast Syria (as Israel wants), or whether the Syrian Kurds will cut a deal with Damascus (after witnessing the crushing of the Barzani Kurdish independence project by neighboring powers).

If the latter occurs, the argument for retaining a longer-term U.S. presence in northeast Syria would lose force. The Saudis will have either to accept defeat in Syria, or act the party-pooper (by trying to re-ignite the remaining proxy forces in Idlib) – but, for that, the kingdom would need Turkey's compliance, and that may not be forthcoming.

Iraq too, irked by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's comments suggesting that the PMU are Iranian – and must "go home" – has already shown signs of re-orientating towards Russia. (It has recently signed an expansive energy and economic protocol with Russia – after having reclaimed control of its borders and of Iraq's energy resources – and is procuring Russian arms). Evidence of Iraq's close connections with Syria, Turkey and Iran was very manifest in the quick execution of the put-down to the Kurdish independence gambit.

But the state facing the biggest dilemma in respect to the Syrian outcome is Israel. Alex Fishman, the doyen of Israeli defense columnists, has written that Israel simply has failed to adjust to strategic change, and is locked in a narrow "cold war" mentality:

"The Syrians fire rockets at open areas: Israel destroys Syrian cannons in response; the Iranians threaten to deploy Shiite forces in Syria: Israel announces 'red lines' and threatens a military conflict; Fatah and Hamas hold futile talks on a unity government: the prime minister declares Israel is suspending talks with the Palestinians – and everyone here applauds the security and political echelons: – 'there, we showed them the meaning of deterrence', [the Israeli leadership repeats].

"But what we are seeing here is a provincial defense policy, a false representation of a leadership that barely sees beyond the tip of its nose, and is busy putting out fires day and night.

"It's a leadership that sees national security through a narrow regional viewpoint. It's as if everything beyond Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran doesn't exist. It's as if the world around us hasn't changed in the past decades, and we are stuck in the era of aggressive solutions in the form of reward and punishment as

the main political-security activity. The current political-security echelon isn't solving problems, isn't dealing with problems, but simply postponing them, passing them on to the next generation"

### **Missing the Strategic Picture**

What Fishman is pointing to is profound: Israel has gained some tactical victories in the neighborhood (i.e. over the Palestinians generally, and in weakening Hamas), but it has lost sight of the wider strategic picture. In effect, Israel has lost its ability to dominate the region. It had wanted a weakened and fragmented Syria; it had wanted a Hezbollah mired in the Syrian mud, and an Iran circumscribed by Sunni sectarian antipathy towards the Shi'a generally. It is unlikely to get any of these.

Rather, Israel finds *itself being deterred* (rather than doing the deterring) by the knowledge that it cannot now overturn its strategic weakness (i.e. risk a three-front war) – unless, and only if, America will fully enter into any conflict, in support of Israel. And this is what worries the security and intelligence echelon: Would America now contemplate a decisive intervention on behalf of Israel – unless the latter's very survival was at risk?

In 2006, Israeli officials recall, the U.S. did not enter Israel's war against Hizbullah in Lebanon, and after 33 days, it was Israel that sought a ceasefire.

Fishman is right too that attacking Syrian factories and radar positions "out of old habit" solves nothing. It may be sold to the Israeli public as "deterrence," but rather it is playing with fire. Syria has started to fire back with aged surface-to-air missiles (S200s) at Israeli aircraft. These missiles may not have hit an Israeli jet yet, and maybe were not even intended so to do. The Syrian message however, is clear: these missiles may be old, but they have a longer range than the newer S300: Potentially, their range is sufficient to reach Ben Gurion Airport outside Tel Aviv.

Are the Israelis sure that Syria and Hezbollah don't have more modern missiles? Are they certain that Iran or Russia will not provide them such? The Russian defense minister was very angry on his visit to Tel Aviv to have been faced with an Israeli retaliatory air attack on a Syrian radar and missile position – as a welcome gift on landing in Israel. To his protests, his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Lieberman condescendingly said that Israel needed nobody's advice in respect to Israel's security. General Sergey Shoygu reportedly was not amused.

Can Israel come to terms with its new strategic situation? It seems not. Ibrahim Karagul, a Turkish political commentator and an authoritative voice

of President Erdogan, writing in *Yeni Safak*, notes that “the foundations of a new disintegration [and] division are being laid in our region. Saudi Arabia’s ‘We are switching to moderate Islam’ announcement contains a dangerous game. The U.S.-Israel axis is forming a new regional front line.”

Karagul continues: “We have been watching the strange developments in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Israel and the U.S. for some time now. There is a new situation in the region, which we know is [principally aimed] against Iran; but has recently taken an open anti-Turkey state, aimed at limiting Turkey’s influence in the region ... You will see, the ‘moderate Islam’ announcement will be immediately followed by a sudden and unexpected strengthening of Arab nationalism. This wave will not differentiate between Shiite or Sunni Arabs, but it will isolate the Muslim Arab world from the entire Muslim world.

“This separation will be felt most by the Shiite Arabs in Iraq. With this new block, Iraq and Iran are going to stage a new power showdown [i.e. will react forcefully to counter it]. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s future in power is also most likely going to [become contingent on the outcome to] this showdown.”

### **An American ‘Buy-in’**

To give this project American “buy-in,” Israel and Saudi Arabia are focusing it on Lebanese Hezbollah, which the U.S. has declared to be a terrorist entity though the movement was part of Lebanon’s government, which was headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri until he ominously resigned today in an announcement made in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Hariri is a dual Saudi-Lebanese national.)

Saudi State Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan (in Beirut last week) called for “toppling Hezbollah” and promised “astonishing” developments in “the coming days. Those who believe that my tweets are a personal stance, are delusional ... the coming developments will definitely be astonishing.”

Al-Sabhan added that the kingdom’s escalation against Hezbollah could take several forms that would “definitely affect Lebanon. Politically, it might target the government’s relations with the world. At the economic and financial levels, it could target commercial exchange and funds, and militarily it might involve the possibility of a strike on Hizbullah by the U.S.-led coalition, which labels Hizbullah a terrorist organization.” (Comment: this latter point probably was made more in hope, than in expectation. Europe and the U.S. set considerable store on maintaining Lebanon as stable).

Karagul reflects further on this U.S.-Gulf-Israeli initiative:

“The moderate Islam project was tried the most in Turkey. We always said this is ‘American Islam’ and opposed it. The February 28 military intervention is the product of such a project. It was implemented by the U.S./Israel extreme right-wing and their partners on the inside. The Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) is the product of such a project, and the Dec. 17/25 and July 15 attacks were made for this very reason. They were all aimed at trapping Turkey within the U.S./Israel axis.

“But Turkey’s local and national resistance has overcome them all. Now they are burdening Saudi Arabia with the same mission. That is how they are making it appear. I do not think that it is possible for Saudi Arabia to undertake such a mission. This is impossible both in terms of the regime’s character and its social structure. This is impossible because of the ‘Israel/U.S. sauce’.

“The discourse of making the switch to moderate Islam will cause serious confusion in the Saudi administration and grave social reactions. The actual conflict is going to take place within Saudi Arabia. Also, the Riyadh administration has no chance of exporting something to the region or setting an example.

“Especially once it is further revealed that the project is security-based, that a new front line has been formed, that it is all planned by the U.S.-Israel, it will result in a fiasco. This project is suicide for Saudi Arabia, it is a destruction plan; it is a plan that will destroy it unless it comes to its senses.”

Karagul makes the point well: the attempt to make Islam in the Christian “Westphalian” image has a disastrous history. The metaphysics of Islam are not those of Christianity. And Saudi Arabia cannot be made “moderate” by Mohammad bin Salman just ordering it. It would entail a veritable cultural revolution to shift the basis of the kingdom, away from the rigors of Wahhabism to some secularized Islam.

### **More War?**

Where is this taking the Middle East: to conflict? Maybe. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not noted for his audacity: he is noted more for rhetoric which often has proved empty; and Israeli security officials are being cautious, but both sides are preparing against the possibility of what Karagul calls a “great power showdown.” It looks, though – from this and other Turkish statements – as if Turkey will be with Iran and Iraq, and standing against America and Saudi Arabia.

And President Trump? He is wholly (and understandably) preoccupied with the low-

intensity war being waged against him at home. He probably tells Netanyahu whatever it is that might advance his domestic battles (in Congress, where Netanyahu has influence). If Bibi wants a fiery speech at the U.N. berating Iran, then, why not? Trump can then call on the trifecta of White House generals to “fix it” (just as he did with JCPOA, passing it to Congress “to fix”), knowing that the generals do not want a war with Iran.

The danger is a “black swan.” What happens if Israel goes on attacking the Syrian army and industrial premises in Syria (which is happening almost daily) – and Syria *does* shoot down an Israeli jet?

**Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.**

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## Trump’s Scary Nuclear Doctrine

Pleasing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and terrifying almost everybody else, President Trump is threatening nuclear war against North Korea and, by implication, war with Iran, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

There are acres of print analyzing “will he, or won’t he” in respect to President Trump taking military action in North Korea. And equally, volumes on what Trump may intend to do in respect of Iran: Is he engaged primarily in rhetorical “theatre” to please his base, and earn press plaudits; or is he girding up for attrition (hot or cold) against Iran?

The unanswered question is: does President Trump regard North Korea and Iran as somehow connected (albeit that Iran has no nuclear weapons, and no nuclear weapons program)? Certainly one person – one who talks to the Trump family a lot – does think the two are directly linked.

Jeffrey Sachs, who listened to Trump’s speech at the United Nations, in which the President said he was ready to “totally destroy” North Korea, tells us about the [audience reaction](#): “Well, you could hear shuffling, chuckles, amazement, gasps, a few applause. *There was Netanyahu enthusiastically applauding.* It was a very odd scene. I am still a bit shaken by it.”

Of course, for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and some neoconservatives, a U.S. attack on the Korean nuclear program sets a wonderful precedent for Iran – for now or for the future.

We just do not know. Trump’s former career as a reality TV host has left him

with a predilection for teasing and hype (“just tune in again next week, to learn more”). What is increasingly plain is that those on the inside – such as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee – are equally unsure whether President Trump is about to unleash “World War III” – or not.

We do know, however, that Trump regards himself as an expert on nuclear conflict: in an 1984 interview with the *Washington Post*, Trump said that he hoped one day to become the United States’ chief negotiator with the Soviet Union for nuclear weapons. Trump claimed that he could negotiate a great nuclear arms deal with Moscow. Comparing crafting an arms accord with cooking up a real estate deal, Trump insisted he had innate talent for this mission.

In a 1990 interview with *Playboy*, Trump said, “I think of the future, but I refuse to paint it. Anything can happen. But I often think of nuclear war.” He explained: “I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war; it’s a very important element in my thought process. It’s the ultimate, the ultimate catastrophe, the biggest problem this world has, and nobody’s focusing on the nuts and bolts of it.”

Five years on, Trump was asked where he would be in five years. “Who knows?” he replied. “Maybe the bombs drop from heaven, who knows? This is a sick world, we’re dealing here with lots of sickos. And you have the nuclear and you have the this, and you have the that.”

### **Foreseeing Nuclear Annihilation**

Trump continued expressing the notion that nuclear annihilation could be on the horizon: “Oh absolutely. I mean, I think it’s sick human nature. If Hitler had the bomb, you don’t think he would have used it? He would have put it in the middle of Fifth Avenue. He would have used Trump Tower, 57th and Fifth. Boom.”

In another *Playboy* interview – this one in 2004 – Trump once more conveyed his nuclear despondency. He was asked, “Do you think Trump Tower and your other buildings will bear your name a hundred years from now?” Trump responded, “I don’t think any building will be here – and unless we have some very smart people ruling it, the world will not be the same place in a hundred years. The weapons are too powerful, too strong.”

During a Republican presidential debate in December 2015, candidate Trump said: “The biggest problem this world has today is not President Obama with global warming. ... The biggest problem we have is nuclear – nuclear proliferation, and having some maniac, having some madman go out and get a nuclear weapon. That’s in my opinion, that is the single biggest problem that our country faces right now. ... I think – I think, for me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is

very important to me.”

“So for decades, it seems” David Corn writes in *Mother Jones*, “Trump has been haunted by the feeling that nuclear war may be inescapable. Now he is in a position to do something about the matter.”

And, as former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper remarked, “[If] in a fit of pique he [Trump] decides to do something about Kim Jong Un, there’s actually very little to stop him. ...The whole [nuclear weapons] system is built to ensure rapid response if necessary. So there’s very little in the way of controls over exercising a nuclear option, which is pretty damn scary.”

In short, should a fatalistically inclined U.S. President order nuclear tactical weapons strikes – possibly believing that nuclear conflict is somehow inevitable – there is almost nothing to stop him.

So, what might all this mean for Iran? The Iranian leadership is no more likely to know whether Trump intends to attack North Korea than Senator Bob Corker, but it must plan for the worst case – and that is, if North Korea is attacked, the case will be made by Israel, and by Iran hawks in America, that Iran will be in a position to weaponize when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has run its course – and that this threat must be pre-empted. (This argument is something of a canard, since Iran is committed to signing the NPT’s Additional Protocol – which provides for intrusive IAEA inspections – even when the JCPOA is complete).

During a meeting with military leaders earlier this month, Trump specifically linked North Korea and Iran, saying his administration was focused on “challenges that we really should have taken care of a long time ago, like North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, ISIS, and the revisionist powers that threaten our interests all around the world. ... We cannot allow this dictatorship [North Korea] to threaten our nation or our allies with unimaginable loss of life. ... We will do what we must do to prevent that from happening. And it will be done, if necessary – believe me.”

### **Iran’s Alarm**

But Iran must also prepare for the other possibility, too. Iran is not threatening the U.S. with nuclear weapons, and Trump’s reference to Iran – as a regional bad actor – may be to please his base, play to American Irano-phobia generally, and to gratify a (vulnerable-feeling) Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In the latter case, Trump may hope to have his cake – and to eat it, too. He can de-certify Iran as being in non-compliance with the JCPOA. (De-certification is a purely U.S. domestic matter, which throws the burden of what to do next

onto Congress. The latter must decide whether or not to re-impose the nuclear-related sanctions on Iran – after a 60-day period of cogitation. Should Congress reinstate sanctions, the U.S. would be in default on the JCPOA agreement – though the agreement would still legally stand, until and if, the United Nations Security Council should jointly, resolve otherwise).

There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that this maybe what Trump plans: to have his cake and eat it, too. The Republican majority in the Senate is wafer thin. Trump's bitter humiliation of Sen. Bob Corker, head of the Foreign Relations Committee, and someone with influence over Democratic senators, makes little sense, were he, Trump, to want Congress to threaten re-imposed sanctions on Iran – should the latter not agree either to tougher JCPOA terms, or to (separate) restrictions on the Iranian missile program.

Congress will be well aware of the difficulties – with gaining support of U.S. allies; in cajoling the U.N. Security Council; and of the U.S. global reputation for serial inconstancy. Even in Washington, it is understood that the triumvirate of White House generals is opposed to igniting a conflagration with Iran, and that Iran too, will never agree to renegotiate the JCPOA.

Indeed, Iran will want no truck with White House talks. Trump can nevertheless “spin” it as Trump, the “hard man,” while setting up Congress to be seen publicly again, as the “weak” component, buckling under the various (real) *impedimenta*. It will be difficult for Congress, nonetheless – given the wide antipathy in America towards Iran – not to sanction Iran further on whatever pretext.

These thoughts might give Iran *some* reassurance, but not much. Iran cannot count on the Europeans, whose banks and financial institutions are already succumbing to sanctions fright. Europe talks of countering any US imposed sanctions on Iran, but does it have the necessary grit?

But more significantly, the Iranian leadership will be aware that Israel is attempting to bully the U.S. into committing to “red lines” for Syria, concerning the Iranian, Hezbollah and Iraqi militia presence there – in the wake of ISIS's defeat in Syria. Israel will be looking for those “red lines” to have the backing of U.S. military force.

For, as Israeli commentators have made plain, Israel has only limited capacity to sustain civilian casualties in any future conflict involving Hezbollah in Lebanon – let alone across an extended front of confrontation extending from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates River. There is a sense building that Israel is coaxing its “prize bull” towards intervening first, in Syria and then, secondly, in Iran.

Iran cannot count on Defense Secretary (and retired General) Jim Mattis holding the line against a new Middle East major intervention (though he is known to oppose it). Iran has no choice, it must be tough. Which is why Iran is busy constructing a new “resistance” front with Turkey and Iraq (Syria is already there) – and with building military structures of deterrence against Israel. Iran, too, has set its own “red line”: “designate the IRGC as a terrorist group, and Iran will do similar for U.S. forces” – a “red line” that permits Iran flexibility of response, depending on how it judges events. But just to be clear, unless somehow arrested, the configuration of events is converging towards new tensions across the Middle East.

All of which takes us the full circle back to our initial (Rumsfeldian) “known unknowns”: How far has Bibi Netanyahu, through his Jared Kushner conduit, convinced President Trump of the inevitability of having to take action against North Korea and Iran – and of the inexorability of the use of nuclear weapons. (During the 2016 campaign, *MSNBC’s* Joe Scarborough reported that Trump had thrice asked a national security adviser why a president couldn’t use nuclear weapons.)

We just don’t know what Trump might order – and, nor it seems, does anyone else – least of all, in Washington.

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## Kurdish Referendum Roils the Mideast

The Kurdish referendum seeking independence from Iraq has created more uncertainty in the turbulent Mideast with Israel appearing to see value in the new chaos, reports ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

One week after Kurdish leader Masud Barzani held his referendum on Kurdish independence from Iraq (with both the referendum and independence being contrary to the Iraqi constitution), the blowback has been fierce, angry and almost universal.

What may have been conceived as a clever ploy by Masud’s eldest son, Masrour, to bolster the Barzani family’s flagging popularity by posing as a nationalist

leader looks increasingly like a misstep. (Michel Rubin of *AEI*, has noted that “some [U.S.] Congressional staff and leaders with whom [Masrour] has met, came away from their meeting convinced that Masrour sought independence more to be heir apparent, in what will become hereditary [Kurdish] leadership, than out of sincere nationalistic concerns.”)

And now, presidential and parliamentary elections – hastily called in the wake of the Oct. 3 death of former Iraqi President and Kurdish political leader Jalal Talibani – have descended into a mess. Rather than settle “the succession” upon his eldest son, Masud Barzani may instead have opened a wider struggle over leadership of the Kurdish people.

Yes, the KRG is reported as being a democracy, but in practice it is run, explains, Michael Rubin, as a (corrupt) family enterprise in which “both the Barzanis (and Talabanis) confuse personal, party, and public funds.” Rubin explains: “Masud Barzani is president and lives in a palace complex in a resort inherited from Saddam Hussein. His nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, is prime minister. His uncle, Hoshiyar Zebari, was Iraq’s foreign minister and is now finance minister. Masud’s eldest son, Masrour Barzani, leads the intelligence service; and his second son, Mansour is a general, as is Masud’s brother Wajy. Barzani’s nephew Sirwan owns the regional cell phone company which, while purchased with public money, remains a private holding. Barzani’s sons are frequently in Washington D.C ... [where] Masrour Barzani has acquired an \$11 million mansion in McLean, Virginia”.

The referendum showed that Kurdish nationalism is an easy play among Kurds (but no one doubted that). Though perhaps, by rejecting the universal advice to cancel or postpone the provocative referendum, Masud Barzani in advertently has provided his opponents with just the rope they needed by which to hang the U.S.-Israeli “Kurdish project.”

While some in the West may see the Kurdish issue as one of justified national self-determination, that is not how it is perceived by neighboring states: It is seen, rather, as a deliberate “political” IED inserted into the most sensitive radial node of the Middle East, intended to explode the statehood of four major nations: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey.

### **A Combustible Region**

This is an area so combustible to explosion precisely because ethnicities there are so diverse and because territorial claims on land – seized several times over in successive waves of ethnic cleansing – are almost impossible to resolve yet regaining those stolen lands remains a passionate objective for those who have been dispossessed.

And it is not the case that the Kurds have been more sinned against (in respect to ethnic cleansing) than they are sinners themselves, as a “Seeking Alpha” business report explains: “the area [northern Iraq] used to be part of major ancient trade route ... [which] over the centuries was settled by diverse populations. The last to settle were Turkic peoples during the Ottoman Empire ... Kirkuk, in particular, is problematic as it’s claimed by Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen with the latter being the most likely to have a legitimate claim.

“The discovery of oil in Kirkuk in 1927 and the following boom, diluted the Turkmen population with migration of Kurds from the north and Arabs from the south. The [last] census of 1957 ... showed at the governorate level that the ethnic makeup was 48.2% Kurds, 28.2% Arabs and 21.4% Turkmen, but that the city of Kirkuk was 37.6% Turkmen, 33.3% Kurds and 22.5% Arabs. These percentages changed significantly under [Saddam Hussein’s] regime which enforced Arabisation at the expense of Kurds and other minorities, but saw a process of reversal after 2003 with the return of some Kurds but not so much the Turkmen.”

*Cui bono* by stirring the pot of rival ethnic claims to territory (and 40 percent of Iraq’s oil resources), plus the potential fracturing of these four states? Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on Wednesday said plainly to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that, in his view, the United States is seeking to create a new “Israel” in the Middle East through the Kurdish secession bid. (And Israel has made it pretty clear in ministerial comments that it welcomes and supports a Kurdish state and sees such to be in the Israeli interest).

Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq have been watching events closely, ever since the U.S. (and some European allies) started to set up the 11 semi-permanent U.S. military bases in northern Syria – in areas in which the Kurds are prominent but not necessarily a majority. However, with the conflict in Syria edging toward conclusion and with Syria resisting plans for a buffer zone along the Golan armistice line and exclusion zones along the Syrian Iraq border, these four states plainly would not be happy about another, even bigger, pro-Western “buffer,” inserted right in their midst.

Barzani, however, is not alone in wanting to reassert his leadership credentials, by playing the “nationalist” card: Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces crucial Iraqi parliamentary elections next year with former PM Nouri al-Maliki close behind and breathing down his neck. Abadi’s tough response to the Kurdish referendum has proved popular with his electoral base and has succeeded in putting some distance between the incumbent and Maliki. Remaining tough on the sovereignty of the state will be crucial to Abadi retaining the premiership.

## **Iraqi Retaliation**



Reuters reports on measures already taken: “Baghdad retaliated against the referendum with an international flight ban on Kurdish airports, while Iran and Turkey launched joint military exercises with Iraqi troops at their borders with Iraqi Kurdistan. [The] Iraqi government has rejected a KRG offer to discuss independence. It demanded Kurdish leaders cancel the result of the referendum or face continued sanctions, international isolation and possible military intervention.

“On Tuesday, Iraq’s central bank told the KRG that it would no longer sell dollars to four leading Kurdish banks and would stop all foreign currency transfers to the region, banking and government sources told Reuters ... Earlier, the federal parliament in Baghdad raised the threat of excluding Kurdish members who took part in the referendum, on the basis that it was unconstitutional. The parliament decided to collect the names of those who voted in the referendum as a step towards their impeachment by the Higher Federal Court, Speaker Salim al-Jabouri told a news conference after the session.”

It is likely that the four states – now closely coordinating – will pursue a process of constitutional attrition against the KRG. Baghdad will seek to regain control of the international airports in the KRG (it already controls the airspace); the regional borders; the oil supply – and Kirkuk, overrun by the Kurds in the wake of ISIS’s seizure of Mosul. The four states will squeeze the KRG economically, until the pips squeak, should Barzani try to use the Peshmerga to retain control of Kirkuk and its oil fields.

The strategic shift here, from the past, is three-fold: All the KRG neighboring states are – for the first time – united in a common hostility to Barzani’s initiative (the KRG is landlocked, so this factor is significant). Secondly, that whereas the Kurdish Peshmerga forces used to have a free run in northern Iraq, in the wake of the 2003 war and the subsequent U.S. occupation, now there has been a major mobilization and arming of the Iraqi *Hashd al-Sha’abi* (PMU) forces. These forces are ready, willing and able, to take on the Peshmerga (the Kurdish militia) militarily in northern Iraq; and thirdly, Russia – though keeping a low profile on the Iraqi Kurdish issue – does, by contrast, take a strong position on *Syrian sovereignty*.

Russia, since its arrival in Syria, has been in close touch with the Syrian Kurdish forces (that is to say, the external relationship to the Syrian Kurdish forces has never been a U.S. monopoly). Indeed, Russia has at times used its own forces to protect the Kurds from the Turkish army (i.e. at Manbij). And although Russia does not say publicly what passes between the Russian armed forces and the Kurds, it is a fair bet that the Russians are telling the Kurds to come to terms with Damascus or be militarily suppressed – should they try to interfere

with the Syrian Army's ongoing recovery of Syrian land (and its oil resources).

### **Bullied by Israel**

So, the key question is how far will the U.S., bullied by Israel, go with this project? It seems that the U.S. government is divided on Kurdish independence – and as Michael Rubin suggests in his article, “Will Masrour Barzani be the CIA's Latest Embarrassment” – and also is somewhat ambivalent about empowering a hereditary Barzani dictatorship.

Rubin writes: “What does this mean for the United States? Privately, both diplomats and intelligence circles seem to understand the dynamics of the Masrour-Nechirvan split and, if it is not too strong a term, the psychopathic trends within Masrour's behavior.”

This refers to reports from international human rights organization of torture committed by Masrour's security forces and of prisoners tortured and jailed when they refused to offer Masrour a percentage of their companies among other issues.

On the one hand, therefore, the Barzani “dictatorship” is problematic for the U.S.'s reputation, and Kurdish independence could threaten the break-up of Iraq (which the U.S. is hoping to use to “roll back” Iran). But, on the other hand, Centcom (the U.S. military command for the region) has fallen in love with the Kurdish recruits Centcom is training in Syria, while the State Department worries more about the big-picture alienation of NATO-member, Turkey. In short, there is no clear U.S. interest (beyond that of Israel).

And yet, events seem to fall into another, forming a pattern. Israel is concerned that it finds itself alone in the Middle East (its only sure ally, for now, being Saudi Arabia). Israel misplayed in Syria. It fears the consequential Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria, and doubts that either the U.S. or Russia will do – or can do – much to mitigate those fears. And so, the Israeli leadership is reacting by escalating its bellicosity (threatening to attack factories in Syria and Lebanon, which it says are manufacturing sophisticated missiles, or permanent Iranian military bases, or both).

Iran's Supreme Leader's identification of a putative Kurdish state as “another Israel”; Hezbollah's warning that Zionists should now consider leaving the region; President Bashar al-Assad's expressed intent to regain *all of* Syria, and Ayatollah Sistani's influential ruling against Kurdish independence, all seem a part of this same pattern: one of escalated warning and of new rules of deterrence.

Essentially then, the Barzani “initiative” has become the peg around which a new

deterrence paradigm is being set, and that his referendum ploy has already been quietly subsumed into this emerging regional stand-off.

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## How Syria's Victory Reshapes Mideast

The failure of the U.S.-Israeli-Saudi "regime change" project in Syria changes the future of the Mideast, possibly ushering in an era of greater secularism and tolerance, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Plainly, Syria's success – notwithstanding the caution of President Bashar al-Assad in saying that signs of success are not success itself – in resisting, against the odds, all attempts to fell the state suggest that a tipping point in the geopolitics of the region has occurred.

We have written before how the Syria outcome dwarfs that of Israel's 2006 war against Hezbollah, significant though the result of that war was, too.

Both events taken together have brought America's unipolar moment in the Middle East to an end (though not globally, since the U.S. still retains its necklace of military bases across the region). The successes have corroded badly the reputation of the Gulf States and have discredited fired-up Sunni jihadism as a "go-to" political tool for Saudi Arabia and its Western backers.

But, aside from the geopolitics, the Syria outcome has created a physical connectivity and contiguity that has not existed for some years: the border between Iraq and Iran is open; the border between Syria and Iraq is opening; and the border between Lebanon and Syria, too, is open. This constitutes a critical mass both of land, resources and population of real weight.

The region will listen intently to what these victors will have to say about their future vision for the region – and for Islam. In particular, how Syria articulates the lessons for Middle Eastern societies in light of its war experience will have a profound import.

This discussion has barely begun in Syria, and has not reached a conclusion – and may not, for some time; but we can speculate a little.

At present, talk is divided between Levantism, which is based in the idea of cultural diversity, such as has existed – alongside periodic acute tensions – in Lebanon and Syria, and Arab nationalism. The framework for both concepts being understood to be a non-assertive secularism within a state structure, encompassing equality before the law.

Arab nationalism looks toward a wide Arab cultural unity, rooted primarily in the Arabic language. Levantism essentially was an Ottoman inheritance. Then (in Ottoman times), there was no “Syria” (in the sense of a nation–state), but *viliyat* (Ottoman provinces), which were more like city-states that were permitted a large quota of self-administration and discretion for diverse societies and sects to live in their own cultural and spiritual ways, including the right to speak their individual languages. (Syrian diversity historically represented the legacy of many foreign occupations, with each leaving behind something of their DNA, their cultures and religion).

### **Colonial Strategies**

Under the subsequent French colonial rule, the colonizers first created separate mini-statelets of these Syrian minorities, but when that policy failed, they reversed into forced unification of Syria’s diverse parts (apart from Lebanon), through a stratagem of imposing the French language instead of Arabic; French law instead of the Ottoman law and mores; and of promoting Christianity in order to undercut Islam. Inevitably, this created the pushback that gave Syria its characteristic suspicion of foreign intervention and its determination to recover a vision of what it was to be Syrian. (The French “regime-changed” Damascus in 1920, 1925, 1926, and 1945, and imposed martial law during most of the pauses in between the coups).

But the nationalism, which the French repression had provoked into life, pulled in two different directions: the Muslim Brotherhood, the major Islamic movement, wanted to grasp Syria as a Sunni Islamic state, while, in contrast, the more Westernized urban élites wanted to “take” Syria – as not exactly a separate nation-state – but more a part of the whole Arab world, and to be domestically organized as a unified, secular, and at least partly Westernized state.

As Patrick Seale noted in *The Struggle for Syria*: “Above all, [for the secular nationalists], disunity had to be overcome. Their answer was to try to bridge the gaps between rich and poor through a modified version of socialism, and between Muslims and minorities through a modified concept of Islam. Islam, in their view, needed to be considered politically not as a religion but as a manifestation of the Arab nation.

“Thus, the society they wished to create, they proclaimed, should be modern

(with, among other things, equality for women), secular (with faith relegated to personal affairs), and defined by a culture of 'Arabism' overriding the traditional concepts of ethnicity."

In short, what they sought was the very antithesis of the objectives of the already strong and growing Muslim Brotherhood. And by 1973, in an attempt to square the circle between conservative, assertive Sunnism and the nationalist "soft" Islam, the *fatwa* (by a Shi'i cleric) asserting Hafez al-Assad to be Shi'i Muslim (rather than *heretic* as Sunnis viewed all Alawites to be), exploded the situation. (The French brokered constitution required that the head of state be "Muslim").

### **A Cycle of Violence**

The Muslim Brotherhood was beside itself in anger at the designation of then President Hafez Assad as Muslim, and thus began a cycle of bloody violence with organized terrorist attacks on the government, and on al-Assad's inner circle – and retaliatory attacks by the government – which, in effect, is only now coming to a conclusion with the defeat of militant, jihadi Sunnism's attempt to seize the state and to oust the "heretic" Alawite.

The outcome of this iconic struggle has profound regional implications (even if we cannot, now, see how the deliberations about the vision for the future of the Levant will finally conclude).

We can say, firstly, Islamism generally is the major loser in the struggle for the Levant. Both in Syria and Iraq, ordinary Levantine Sunnis have been sickened by intolerant, puritan Islam. This orientation of Islam (Wahhabism) that demanded (on pain of death) a linear singularity of meaning to Islam, which asserts its "truth" from the certainty conveyed from a mechanical, procedural, approach to validating selected "sayings" of the Prophet Mohammad (known as "scientific" Salafism), has failed.

Armed jihadism has failed to leverage this linear singularity as the "idea" with which to crush the polyvalent Levantine model and replace it with a rigid, monovalent literalism. Just to be clear, it is not just the non-Muslims and the minority Sunni and Shi'i sects who have had enough of it: Sunni Syrians and Iraqis, more generally, have too (especially after the experience of Raqqa and Mosul).

The public reaction to the Wahhabi interventions in both nations is likely to push Sunni Islam firstly to embrace polyvalence in Islam more tightly (even to the extent, possibly, of looking to Iran and its "mode of being" as a possible model); and secondly, to embrace further the Arab secular "way," too. In short,

one “fallout” may be a more secular style of Islam, in contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood’s emphasis on external, visible, exclusionary, identity politics.

But, if the Syrian and Iraqi nationalist *Islamic* impulse is over, what of the other “double aspect” to Syria – its legacy of Levantine diversity and polyvalence versus the secular nationalist perspective that diversity constitutes a primary cause of national weakness. And which sees its primary task as that of integrating the population into a single political and social structure.

### **Israel’s New Scheme**

Well, much in this latter respect will hang on Washington: the French colonists leveraged the Syrian minorities against the Syrian majority (in the French interest). And now America seems intent – with Israel pushing hard from behind – to leverage the Kurds against the Syrian State (in the interest of limiting the extent of Iranian presence within Syria, and even to try to break the contiguity between Iraq and Syria).

That latter prospect seems unlikely. The U.S.-Israeli Kurdish “project” in Syria may fail, as Kurds (much less concentrated in northeastern Syria than they are in northern Iraq), conclude that it would be better and wiser to come to terms with Moscow (and therefore find some *modus vivendi* with Damascus), rather than trusting to the constancy of American promises of autonomy – amid the almost universal regional hostility to this high-risk independence project. Ultimately, it must be obvious to the Kurds that it is Russia (and Iran) that represent the incoming tide into the northern tier states.

The Syrian Kurds never were in the Masoud Barzani camp and long have had working relations with the Syrian army and Russian forces (versus ISIS), during the conflict. It seems, in any event, that the U.S. main focus is shifting away from Syria to Iraq, as the locus in which they hope to push back against Iran. Again, the prospects there for the U.S. to achieve this aim are poor (Iran is well dug in) – and if mishandled, the Kurdish independence “project” easily could spin into violence and region-wide instability.

Barzani’s leadership is not secure (the Turks are livid at his double-cross of pretending that the referendum was only to strengthen his negotiating hand with Baghdad). And the risk of wider conflict, were Barzani to be removed from power, would be contingent on who ultimately succeeded to the leadership.

In sum, the U.S.-Israeli Kurdish “project” seems – paradoxically – more likely forcefully to strengthen the nationalist impulse across the Levant, Turkey and Iran and to make it more assertive – but not in the old way: there is no going

back to the *status quo ante* in Syria. The processes of de-escalation and reconciliation facilitated by Russia – in and of themselves – will change fundamentally the politics of Syria.

### **A Shift Toward Diversity**

If in the past, politics was top-down, it will now be bottom-up. This is where we see something of a synthesis taking place between Levantism and nationalism. The needs of local politics, in all its diversity, will be much more the future drivers of politics. One can see already that this shift to bottom-up politics is already becoming apparent in Iraq, too. (Again, it has been accelerated by the war against the extreme jihadism of ISIS, but now may become further energized by Kurdish claims to disputed Iraqi territories.)

In some respects, the “ground” in Iraq – the mobilization of the people against these reactionary armed movements – is running ahead of, and away from the Iraqi political leadership, be it political or religious. The unrest may grow, and the government – any government – will have to bend to pressures from their base.

The Western leveraging of minorities against the state – now the Kurds – has already had a major geostrategic impact: that of bringing Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran into close political and military alliance in order to stop this “Kurdish project” from materializing and dissolving the outlines of major states, precisely at their most sensitive juncture.

Essentially, this represents another case where the interests of Israel do not coincide with those of Europe or America. The pursuit of this “Kurdish project” is empowering an alliance – including a major NATO state – that will be explicitly hostile to these American aims (though this does not imply any increase of hostility to the Kurds as a people – though that too may result). The alienation of these states would hardly seem to be in the Western interest, but nonetheless, this is what is occurring.

And finally, the “fallout” from the Syria conflict has prompted the northern tier states to “Look East” – as President Assad recently instructed his diplomats so to do. For Iran it may be primarily to China (as well as to Russia), but for Syria, it is more likely to be Russia in a predominantly cultural way, with China seeing Syria as an “important node” in its *Belt & Road Initiative*.

This represents a historic shift in the Middle East. Western officials may imagine that they have a hold over Syria by holding reconstruction funding hostage to having their way with Syria’s future: if this is so, they will as wrong about this as they have been on almost everything pertaining to Syria.

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