

# The 'Hybrid War' of Economic Sanctions

U.S. politicians love the “silver bullet” of economic sanctions to punish foreign adversaries, but the weapon’s overuse is driving China and Russia to develop countermeasures, as British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told a large group of people in the holy city of Mashhad on Sunday that “The Americans did not act on what they promised in the [Iranian] nuclear accord [the JCPOA]; they did not do what they should have done. According to Foreign Minister [Javad Zarif], they brought something on paper but prevented materialization of the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran through many diversionary ways.”

This statement during the Supreme Leader’s key *Nowruz* (New Year) address should be understood as a flashing amber light: it was no rhetorical flourish. And it was not a simple dig at America (as some may suppose). It was perhaps more of a gentle warning to the Iranian government to “take care” of the possible political consequences.

What is happening is significant: for whatever motive, the U.S. Treasury is busy emptying much of the JCPOA sanctions relief of any real substance (and their motive is something which deserves careful attention). The Supreme Leader also noted that Iran is experiencing difficulties in repatriating its formerly frozen, external funds.

U.S. Treasury officials, since “implementation” day, have been doing the rounds, warning European banks that the U.S. sanctions on Iran remain in place, and that European banks should not think, even for a second, of tapping the dollar or euro bond markets in order to finance trade with Iran, or to become involved with financing infrastructure projects in Iran.

Banks well understand the message: touch Iranian commerce and you will be whacked with a billion dollar fine – against which there is no appeal, no clear legal framework – and no argument countenanced. The banks (understandably) are shying off. Not a single bank or financial lending institution turned up when Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Paris to hold meetings with the local business élite.

The influential *Keyhan* Iranian newspaper wrote on March 14 on this matter that: “Speaking at the UN General Assembly session in September, Rouhani stated: ‘Today a new phase of relations has started in Iran’s relations with the world.’ He also stated in a live radio and television discussion with the people on

23 *Tir*: 'The step-by-step implementation of this document could slowly remove the bricks of the wall of mistrust.'

*Keyhan* continues: "These remarks were made at a time when the Western side, headed by America, does not have any intention to remove or even shorten the wall of mistrust between itself and Iran. ... Moreover, they are delaying the implementation of their JCPOA commitments. Lifting the sanctions has remained *merely as a promise on a piece of paper*, so much so that it has roused the protest of Iranian politicians.

"The American side is promoting conditions in such a way that today even European banks and companies do not dare to establish financial relations with Iran – since all of them fear America's reaction in the form of sanctions [imposed on those same banks]. Actually, the reason for the delay in the commencement of the European banks' financial cooperation with the Iranian banks and the failure to facilitate banking and economic transactions, is because many of the American sanctions are still in place, and Iranian banks' financial transactions are [still] facing restrictions. Moreover, given their continuing fear of the biting legislations and penalties for violations of the Americans' old sanctions, European financial institutions are concerned about violating the American sanctions that continue to be in force ...

"It is pointless to expect the US administration to cooperate with Iran given the comments of the US officials, including [National Security Advisor] Susan Rice, since the Americans' comments and behaviour reveal their non-compliance with their obligations and speak of the absence of the US administration's political will to implement even its minimum obligations."

Here *Keyhan* is specifically referring to Susan Rice's observation to Jeffrey Goldberg in *the Atlantic* that, "The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the US and Iran. The aim was very simply to make a dangerous country less dangerous. No one had any expectation that Iran would be a more benign actor."

*Keyhan* continues: "Any action on the international scene calls for suitable and appropriate reaction. Therefore, we cannot expect a government like the US administration that seizes every single opportunity to restrict our country, to lift the sanctions. Rice's recent comments are only a small part of the increasing anti-Iranian rhetoric of the American officials in recent months. These remarks should actually be regarded as a sign ... that the dream of the JCPOA is nothing but wishful thinking and far from reality." (Emphasis added).

The Supreme Leader's nudge therefore was intended for the ears of the government: Do not build too much politically on this accord: beware its

foundations may turn out to be built on sand.

### **'Silver Bullet' Worries**

Recently U.S. Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew gave a talk at *Carnegie*, on the Evolution of Sanctions and Lessons for the Future, on which David Ignatius commented: "Economic sanctions have become the 'silver bullet' of American foreign policy over the past decade, because they're cheaper and more effective in compelling adversaries than traditional military power. But Jack Lew warns of a 'risk of overuse' that could neuter the sanctions weapon and harm America. His caution against overuse comes as some Republican members of Congress are fighting to maintain U.S. sanctions on the Iranian nuclear program despite last year's deal limiting that Iranian threat."

So what is going on here? If Lew is warning against sanction overreach, why is it that it is precisely his department that is the one that is so assiduously undermining sanctions relief for Iran – "particularly since Lew's larger point is that sanctions won't work if countries don't get the reward they were promised – in the removal of sanctions – once they accede to U.S. Demands", in the paraphrase by Ignatius himself?

One reason for this apparent contradiction implicit in Lew's remarks probably is China: Recall that when China's stock markets were in freefall and hemorrhaging foreign exchange, as it sought to support the Yuan – China blamed the U.S. Fed (U.S. Reserve Bank) for its problems – and promptly was derided for making such an "outlandish" accusation.

Actually, what the Fed was then doing was stating its intent to raise interest rates (for the best of motives naturally!) – just as those, such as Goldman Sachs, have been advising. U.S. Corporate and bank profits are sliding badly, and in "times of financial depletion," as the old adage goes, "bringing capital home becomes the priority" – and a strong dollar does exactly that.

But the Peoples' Bank of China (PBOC) did a bit more than just whine about the Fed actions, it reacted: *It allowed the Yuan to weaken*, which induced turmoil across a global financial world (already concerned about China's economic slowing); then raised the Yuan value to squeeze out speculation, betting on further falls in the Yuan; then let it weaken again as the Fed comments started to slide in favor of interest rate hikes, and a strong dollar – until finally, as *Zero Hedge* has noted:

"It appeared the messaging from The People's Bank Of China to The Fed was heard loud and understood. Having exercised its will to weaken the Yuan (implying turmoil is possible), Janet Yellen (Fed Chair) delivered the dovish goods [i.e.

indicated that global conditions trumped the advice of the likes of Goldman Sachs to strengthen the dollar], and so China ‘allowed’ the Yuan to rally back. In a double-whammy for everyone involved, the biggest 3-day strengthening of the Yuan fix since 2005 also pushed the Yuan forwards, back to their richest relative to spot since Aug 2014 – once again showing their might against the dastardly speculative shorts.”

In short, the Ignatius’s “silver bullet” of foreign policy (the U.S. Treasury Wars against any potential competitor to U.S. political or financial hegemony) is facing a growing “hybrid” financial war, just as NATO has been complaining that it is having to adjust to “hybrid” conventional war – from the likes of Russia.

So, as the U.S. tries to expand its reach, for example by claiming legal jurisdiction over the Bank of China, and by blacklisting one of China’s largest telecom companies, thus forbidding any U.S. company from doing business with China’s ZTE, China is pushing back. It has just demonstrated convincingly that U.S. Treasury “silver bullets” can fall short.

This, we think, may have been Lew’s point – one directed, possibly, at Congress, which has become truly passionate about its new-found “neutron bomb” (as a former Treasury official described its geo-financial warfare).

In respect to Russia, this is important: Russia and America seem to be edging towards some sort of “grand bargain” over Syria (and possibly Ukraine too), which is likely to involve the Europeans lifting, in mid-2016, their sanctions imposed on Russia. But again, the U.S. is likely nonetheless to maintain its own sanctions (or even add to them, as some in the U.S. Congress are arguing).

So, if Russia, like Iran and China become disenchanted with promises of U.S. sanctions relaxation – then, as the *Keyhan* author noted, a suitable and appropriate (i.e. adverse) reaction, will ensue.

### **Boomerang Effect**

What the Fed and Lew seem to have assimilated is that the U.S. and European economies are now so vulnerable and volatile that China and Russia can, as it were, whack-back at America – especially where China and Russia co-ordinate strategically. Yellen specifically signaled “weakening world growth” and “less confidence in the renormalization process” as reasons for the Fed backtrack.

Ironically, David Ignatius in his article gives the game away: Lew is not going soft, saying that the US needs to use its tools more prudently; far from it. His point is different, and Ignatius exposes it inadvertently:

“U.S. power flows from our unmatched military might, yes. But in a deeper way, it’s a product of the dominance of the U.S. economy. Anything that expands the reach of U.S. markets – such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership in trade, for example – adds to the arsenal of U.S. power. Conversely, U.S. power is limited by measures that drive business away from America, *or allow other nations to build a rival financial architecture that’s less encumbered by a smorgasbord of sanctions.*”

This latter point precisely is what is frightening Lew and Ignatius. The tables are turning: in fact, the U.S. and Europe may be becoming more vulnerable to retaliation (e.g. Europe, with Russia’s retaliatory sanctions on European agricultural products) than China and Russia are, to unilateral Treasury or Fed warfare.

*This is the new hybrid war* (and not the hot air issuing from NATO). Lew and Ignatius know that a parallel “architecture” is under construction, and that Congress’ addiction to new sanctions is just speeding it into place.

So, why then is the U.S. Treasury so zealous in undermining the effectiveness of JCPOA’s agreed lifting of sanctions? Well, probably because Iran has less leverage over the global financial system than either China or Russia. But also perhaps, because “Iran sanctions” are (erroneously) viewed by U.S. leaders as the Treasury’s “jewel in its crown” of geo-financial success.

What may be missing from this hubristic interpretation, however, is the understanding that Iran’s experience will not be lost on the others, nor on the SCO when it convenes its next meetings on how to combat Western “color revolution” operations (with Iran likely joining that organization as a member, rather than an observer, this summer).

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## Cornering Russia, Risking World War III

Official Washington is awash with tough talk about Russia and the need to punish

President Putin for his role in Ukraine and Syria. But this bravado ignores Russia's genuine national interests, its "red lines," and the risk that "tough-guy-ism" can lead to nuclear war, as Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

We all know the narrative in which we (the West) are seized. It is the narrative of the Cold War: America versus the "Evil Empire." And, as Professor Ira Chernus has written, since we are "human" and somehow they (the USSR or, now, ISIS) plainly are not, we must be their polar opposite in every way.

"If they are absolute evil, we must be the absolute opposite. It's the old apocalyptic tale: God's people versus Satan's. It ensures that we never have to admit to any meaningful connection with the enemy." It is the basis to America's and Europe's claim to exceptionalism and leadership.

And "buried in the assumption that the enemy is not in any sense human like us, is [an] *absolution* for whatever hand we may have had in sparking or contributing to evil's rise and spread. How could we have fertilized the soil of absolute evil or bear any responsibility for its successes? It's a basic postulate of wars against evil: God's people must be innocent," (and that the evil cannot be mediated, for how can one mediate with evil).

Westerners may generally think ourselves to be rationalist and (mostly) secular, but Christian modes of conceptualizing the world still permeate contemporary foreign policy.

It is this Cold War narrative of the Reagan era, with its correlates that America simply stared down the Soviet Empire through military and as importantly – financial "pressures," whilst making no concessions to the enemy.

What is sometimes forgotten, is how the Bush neo-cons gave their "spin" to this narrative for the Middle East by casting Arab national secularists and Ba'athists as the offspring of "Satan": David Wurmser was advocating in 1996, "expediting the chaotic collapse" of secular-Arab nationalism in general, and Baathism in particular. He concurred with King Hussein of Jordan that "the phenomenon of Baathism" was, from the very beginning, "an agent of foreign, namely Soviet policy."

Moreover, apart from being agents of socialism, these states opposed Israel, too. So, on the principle that if these were the enemy, then my enemy's enemy (the kings, Emirs and monarchs of the Middle East) became the Bush neo-cons friends. And they remain such today however much their interests now diverge from those of the U.S.

The problem, as Professor Steve Cohen, the foremost Russia scholar in the U.S., laments, is that it is this narrative which has precluded America from ever concluding any real ability to find a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* with Russia which it sorely needs, if it is ever seriously to tackle the phenomenon of Wahhabist jihadism (or resolve the Syrian conflict).

What is more, the “Cold War narrative” simply does not reflect history, but rather the narrative *effaces history*: It loses for us the ability to really understand the demonized “calous tyrant” be it (Russian) President Vladimir Putin or (Ba’athist) President Bashar al-Assad – because we simply ignore the actual history of how that state came to be what it is, and, our part in it becoming what it is.

Indeed the state, or its leaders, often are not what we think they are – at all. Cohen explains: “The chance for a durable Washington-Moscow strategic partnership was lost in the 1990 after the Soviet Union ended. Actually it began to be lost earlier, because it was [President Ronald] Reagan and [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev who gave us the opportunity for a strategic partnership between 1985-89.

“And it certainly ended under the Clinton Administration, and it didn’t end in Moscow. It ended in Washington, it was squandered and lost in Washington. And it was lost so badly that today, and for at least the last several years (and I would argue since the Georgian war in 2008), we have literally been in a new Cold War with Russia.

“Many people in politics and in the media don’t want to call it this, because if they admit, ‘Yes, we are in a Cold War,’ they would have to explain what they were doing during the past 20 years. So they instead say, ‘No, it is not a Cold War.’

“Here is my next point. This new Cold War has all of the potential to be even more dangerous than the preceding 40-year Cold War, for several reasons. First of all, think about it. The epicentre of the earlier Cold War was in Berlin, not close to Russia. There was a vast buffer zone between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe.

“Today, the epicentre is in Ukraine, literally on Russia’s borders. It was the Ukrainian conflict that set this off, and politically Ukraine remains a ticking time bomb. Today’s confrontation is not only on Russia’s borders, but it’s in the heart of Russian-Ukrainian ‘Slavic civilization.’ This is a civil war as profound in some ways as was America’s Civil War.”

Cohen continued: “My next point: and still worse – You will remember that after

the Cuban Missile Crisis, Washington and Moscow developed certain rules-of-mutual conduct. They saw how dangerously close they had come to a nuclear war, so they adopted “No-Nos,” whether they were encoded in treaties or in unofficial understandings. Each side knew where the other’s red line was. Both sides tripped over them on occasion but immediately pulled back because there was a mutual understanding that there were red lines.

“TODAY THERE ARE NO RED LINES. One of the things that Putin and his predecessor President Medvedev keep saying to Washington is: You are crossing our Red Lines! And Washington said, and continues to say, ‘You don’t have any red lines. We have red lines and we can have all the bases we want around your borders, but you can’t have bases in Canada or Mexico. Your red lines don’t exist.’ This clearly illustrates that today there are no mutual rules of conduct.

“Another important point: Today there is absolutely no organized anti-Cold War or Pro-Detente political force or movement in the United States at all not in our political parties, not in the White House, not in the State Department, not in the mainstream media, not in the universities or the think tanks. None of this exists today.

“My next point is a question: Who is responsible for this new Cold War? I don’t ask this question because I want to point a finger at anyone. The position of the current American political media establishment is that this new Cold War is all Putin’s fault all of it, everything. We in America didn’t do anything wrong. At every stage, we were virtuous and wise and Putin was aggressive and a bad man. And therefore, what’s to rethink? Putin has to do all of the rethinking, not us.”

These two narratives, the Cold War narrative, and the neocons’ subsequent “spin” on it: i.e. Bill Kristol’s formulation (in 2002) that precisely because of its Cold War “victory,” America could, and must, become the “benevolent global hegemon,” guaranteeing and sustaining the new American-authored global order an “omelette that cannot be made without breaking eggs” – converge and conflate in Syria, in the persons of President Assad and President Putin.

President Obama is no neocon, but he is constrained by the global hegemon legacy, which he must either sustain, or be labeled as the arch facilitator of America’s decline. And the President is also surrounded by R2P (“responsibility-to-protect”) proselytizers, such as Samantha Power, who seem to have convinced the President that “the tyrant” Assad’s ouster would puncture and collapse the Wahhabist jihadist balloon, allowing “moderate” jihadists such as Ahrar al-Sham to finish off the deflated fragments of the punctured ISIS balloon.

In practice, President Assad's imposed ouster precisely will empower ISIS, rather than implode it, and the consequences will ripple across the Middle East and beyond. President Obama privately may understand the nature and dangers of the Wahhabist cultural revolution, but seems to adhere to the conviction that everything will change if only President Assad steps down. The Gulf States said the same about Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. He has gone (for now), but what changed? ISIS got stronger.

Of course if we think of ISIS as evil, for evil's sake, bent on mindless, whimsical slaughter, "what a foolish task it obviously [would be] to think about the enemy's actual motives. After all, to do so would be to treat them as humans, with human purposes arising out of history. It would smack of sympathy for the devil. Of course," Professor Chernus continues, "this means that, whatever we might think of their actions, we generally ignore a wealth of evidence that the Islamic State's fighters couldn't be more human or have more comprehensible motivations."

Indeed, ISIS and the other Caliphate forces have very clear human motivations and clearly articulated political objectives, and none of these is in any way consistent with the type of Syrian State that America says it wants for Syria. This precisely reflects the danger of becoming hostage to a certain narrative, rather than being willing to examine the prevailing conceptual framework more critically.

America lies far away from Syria and the Middle East, and as Professor Stephen Cohen notes, "unfortunately, today's reports seem to indicate that the White House and State Department are thinking primarily how to counter Russia's actions in Syria. They are worried, it was reported, that Russia is diminishing America's leadership in the world."

It is a meme of perpetual national *insecurity*, of perpetual fears about America's standing and of challenges to its standing, Professor Chernus suggests.

But Europe is not "far away"; it lies on Syria's doorstep. It is also neighbor to Russia. And in this connection, it is worth pondering Professor Cohen's last point: Washington's disinclination to permit Russia any enhancement to its standing in Europe, or in the non-West, through its initiative strategically to defeat Wahhabist jihadism in Syria, is not only to play with fire in the Middle East. It is playing with a fire of even greater danger: to do both at the same time seems extraordinarily reckless.

Cohen again: "The false idea [has taken root] that the nuclear threat ended with the Soviet Union: In fact, the threat became more diverse and difficult. This is

something the political elite forgot. It was another disservice of the Clinton Administration (and to a certain extent the first President Bush in his re-election campaign) saying that the nuclear dangers of the preceding Cold War era no longer existed after 1991. The reality is that the threat grew, whether by inattention or accident, and is now more dangerous than ever.”

As Europe becomes accomplice in raising the various pressures on Russia in Syria – economically through sanctions and other financial measures, in Ukraine and Crimea, and in beckoning Montenegro, Georgia and the Baltic towards NATO – we should perhaps contemplate the paradox that Russia’s determination to try to avoid war is leading to war.

Russia’s call to co-operate with Western states against the scourge of ISIS; its low-key and carefully crafted responses to such provocations as the ambush of its SU-24 bomber in Syria; and President Putin’s calm rhetoric, are all being used by Washington and London to paint Russia as a “paper tiger,” whom no one needs fear.

In short, Russia is being offered only the binary choice: to acquiesce to the “benevolent” hegemon, or to prepare for war.

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## Lost on the ‘Dark Side’ in Syria

The full story of how the U.S. ended up allied with some Sunni extremists in Syria while at war with others is a convoluted tale dating back to President George W. Bush’s neocons venturing off into Vice President Cheney’s “dark side” to work with violent jihadists, writes British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

When, in early August, the Pentagon’s former highest ranking intelligence official, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, said that it had been a “willful decision” by the “West” to back the establishment of “a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in Eastern Syria” in order to bring pressure on the Syrian government, and then went on to confirm that the recently declassified 2012 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report on the rise of ISIS in Syria, had explicitly

warned of the possibility of “an Islamic State” being declared “through a union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria,” there was almost silence in the mainstream media.

No one wanted to touch the “live wire” of possible U.S. collusion with Caliphate forces. But it was clear enough what the American General was saying: the jihadification of the Syrian conflict had been a “willful” policy decision, and that since Al Qaeda and the ISIS embryo were the only movements capable of establishing such a Caliphate across Syria and Iraq, then it plainly followed that the U.S. administration, and its allies, tacitly accepted this outcome, in the interests of weakening, or of overthrowing, the Syrian state.

Many in the West found General Flynn’s comments hard to believe in spite of his direct knowledge of events. How could this be? It must have seemed so counter-intuitive to most viewers or readers. And it is something which touches on a still suppurating wound to the Western psyche: 9/11.

But now, with Russia and Iran’s military intervention, the Syria mess in which the West finds itself is only too evident: Russia is providing air cover to the Syrian army, intent on severing the insurgent supply lines from Turkey, on the one hand, and to cutting the Mosul to Aleppo supply route, on the other – as a precursor to the strategic defeat of ISIS.

But in face of these actions, Western leaders are widely seen to be prevaricating, and even seem to wish to impede, and to inflict direct pain, on Russian and others’ attempts to defeat the radical Caliphate forces, by endorsing a wave of TOW missiles and MANPADS reaching Syria from their Gulf suppliers. So where exactly does the West stand?

The forces which the 4+1 Alliance (Russia, Syria Iran and Iraq plus Hezbollah) has to defeat sometimes are not ISIS, but Al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham – jihadist, Caliphate forces, in short, that have absolutely no interest in any political settlement other than their own victory. Yet Western leaders shout “foul,” and imply that these are somehow “our boys” and should not be attacked.

### **The West’s Mess**

The “mess” that the West is in is apparent to all across the region: the U.S. and its allies are both ostensibly “at war” with head-chopping, radical Sunni forces, and “in bed” with them, at the same time. How could this have happened? How can this mess be resolved?

The roots to U.S. ambivalence towards fired-up radical Sunni Islam (as I have previously noted) lie primarily with the group of American neoconservatives who formed an influential “Cold-Warrior” nexus around Vice President Dick Cheney,

and who were obsessed with rolling-back Soviet influence in the Middle East, and in overturning the Arab socialist-nationalist states who were viewed both as Soviet clients, and as threats to Israel.

David Wurmser, Cheney's Middle East adviser, stressed (in 1996) that "limiting and expediting the chaotic collapse" of Ba'athism must be America's foremost priority in the region. Secular-Arab nationalism should be given no quarter, *not even*, he added, *for the sake of stemming the tide of Islamic fundamentalism*.

In setting the destruction of secular nationalism as its overwhelming priority, America by default found itself compelled to be allied with the Gulf Kings and Emirs who traditionally have resorted to Sunni jihadism as the inoculation against democracy.

But America's (and Britain's) use of radical Sunni jihadist movements for their "greater geo-political ends" was already well-embedded long before 1996. When asked whether he regretted the CIA giving covert support to jihadists in Afghanistan *six months prior* to the Soviet military intervention (at Kabul's request), President Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbig Brzezinski, replied:

"Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul [the Soviets intervened on Dec. 24, 1979]. And that very day, I wrote a note to the President in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid [to radical Islamic forces] was going to induce a Soviet military intervention [in Afghanistan]."

Q: Despite this risk, you were an advocate of this covert action. But perhaps you yourself desired this Soviet entry into war, and looked to provoke it?

Brzezinski: It isn't quite that. We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.

Q: When the Soviets justified their intervention by asserting that they intended to fight against a secret involvement of the United States in Afghanistan, people didn't believe them. However, there was a basis of truth. You don't regret anything today?

Brzezinski: Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War

Q: And neither do you regret having supported the Islamic mujahedeen, having given arms and advice to future terrorists?

Brzezinski: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

Q: Some stirred-up Moslems? But it has been said and repeated: Islamic fundamentalism represents a world menace today.

Brzezinski: Nonsense!

### **The Neocon Scheme**

Though the principle of using fired-up Sunni jihadism for U.S. geopolitical ends was already well-established, the roots to today's American Syria imbroglio lie more with the events of 2006 and 2007: the 2003 war in Iraq had not brought about the pro-Israeli, pro-American regional bloc that had been foreseen by the neocons, but rather, it had stimulated a powerful "Shia Crescent" of resistance stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean – and Gulf leaders had become frightened.

The Sunni states "were petrified of a Shiite resurgence, and there was growing resentment with our gambling on the moderate Shiites in Iraq," a U.S. government consultant said at the time. "We cannot reverse the Shiite gain in Iraq, but we can contain it."

It had been Israel's failure in its 2006 war to seriously damage Hezbollah, that had been the straw, as it were, that broke the camel's back – so unnerving Israel and Gulf leaders. And it provoked, too, a fierce debate within Washington:

"It seems there has been a debate inside the government over what's the biggest danger, Iran or Sunni radicals," Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told Seymour Hersh: "The Saudis and some in the administration, have been arguing that the biggest threat is Iran; and the Sunni radicals are the lesser enemies. This is a victory for the Saudi line."

It was also, in a sense, a victory for the closely, Saudi-aligned Sunni leadership of Lebanon, which over the preceding years, had deepened its connection with Sunni extremist groups that espoused a militant vision of Islam (such as *Fatah al-Islam*), and were hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

These covert allies of March 14<sup>th</sup> [a Lebanese anti-Syrian coalition named after the date of the so-called Cedar Revolution ] were viewed by the Lebanese Sunni élite as the putative foot soldiers "war experienced" from the Iraq conflict who could be nurtured, and eventually would rise sufficiently in their

capabilities, to take on Hezbollah militarily in Lebanon: they were to be March 14<sup>th</sup>'s Sunni shock-troops, in other words, who would contain Shia influence, and perhaps even ultimately defeat it.

This Lebanese experience was held up to the U.S. administration by those such as Jeff Feltman (then U.S. ambassador in Beirut) as the "pilot" strategy for what could be achieved in Syria. March 14<sup>th</sup> leaders argued that they could safely manage these radical elements: that despite inclining towards an al-Qaeda orientation, they stood somehow within the broad Sunni "tent," erected and led by Saad Hariri and Saudi Arabia.

The fall of Syria held out the prospect of a wedge being jammed in between Iran and Israel's nemesis: Hezbollah. It was a prospect that enticed the U.S. administration: "This time, the U.S. government consultant told me," wrote Seymour Hersh, "Bandar and other Saudis have assured the White House that 'they will keep a very close eye on the religious fundamentalists. Their message to us was "We've created this movement, and we can control it." It's not that we don't want the Salafis to throw bombs; it's *who* they throw them at, [they should throw them at] Hezbollah, Moqtada al-Sadr, Iran, and at the Syrians – [should] they continue to work with Hezbollah and Iran.'"

### **'Sick and Hateful'**

Not all Saudis however were so sure: one former Saudi diplomat, speaking to Hersh, accused Hezbollah's leader, Nasrallah, of attempting "to hijack the state," but he also objected to the Lebanese and Saudi sponsorship of Sunni jihadists in Lebanon: "Salafis are sick and hateful, and I'm very much against the idea of flirting with them," he said. "They hate the Shiites, but they hate Americans more. If you try to outsmart them, they will outsmart us. It will be ugly."

Cheney and his team nevertheless were intrigued by Bandar's ideas for Syria, but remained cautious: "We need to do everything possible to destabilize the Syrian regime and exploit every single moment they strategically overstep." (As Cheney famously said, "We also have to work – though sort of on the dark side – if you will.")

In an interview with the *Telegraph* in 2007, David Wurmser (former adviser to Cheney and John Bolton) confirmed, "that [this] would include the willingness to escalate as far as we need to go to topple the [Syrian] regime if necessary." He said that "an end to Baathist rule in Damascus could trigger a domino effect that would then bring down the Teheran regime."

Bandar had boasted of his ability to manage the jihadists: "Leave that aspect to

me.” Cheney’s then National Security Adviser, John Hannah, later noted the consensus at the time: “Bandar working without reference to U.S. interests is clearly cause for concern. But Bandar working as a partner against a common Iranian enemy is a major strategic asset.”

This point the entry of Saudi Arabia into a major initiative against Syria – also marked the start of the strategic alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia, united in their common hostility to Iran.

In fact, the former Saudi diplomat had been right. Neither Hariri, nor Prince Bandar, was able to control the inflamed Caliphate forces with which they were working. What moderates there were, simply kept migrating politically towards the Al-Qaeda and the ISIS Caliphate camp and CIA-supplied weapons migrated too. The Syrian conflict was becoming, in character, increasingly jihadist, just as General Flynn was warning as early as 2012.

President Barack Obama is clear that, from the outset, he never believed in the notion of “moderates.” In 2012, he told Jeffrey Goldberg, “When you have a professional army that is well-armed and sponsored by two large states who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict—, the notion that we could have, in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces, changed the equation on the ground there was never true.” (Emphasis added).

Obama did not believe in the moderates, but was under pressure from the “hawks,” including his own envoys, Fred Hof and General Allen, to expedite President Assad’s ouster. But the President was adamant that “We’re not going to just dive in and get involved with a civil war that in fact involves some elements of people who are genuinely trying to get a better life but also involve some folks who would over the long term do the United States harm.”

The answer as so often was to move to more covert means in order to mollify the “hawks” by increasing the clandestine operations in support of the opposition including the jihadists:

President Obama: And it is our estimation that [President Bashar al-Assad’s] days are numbered. It’s a matter not of if, but when. Now, can we accelerate that? We’re working with the world community to try to do that. ()

Goldberg: Is there anything you could do to move it faster?

President Obama: Well, nothing that I can tell you, because your classified clearance isn’t good enough. (Laughter.)

## No 'Clean Way'

But plainly, the administration could see how others not in "a clean way" were changing "the equation on the ground." In 2014, Vice President Biden was rather more candid:

"The fact of the matter is the ability to identify a moderate middle in Syria was—there was no moderate middle because the moderate middle are made up of shopkeepers, not soldiers—"

"And what my constant cry was that our biggest problem is our allies—our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks —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, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world

"And we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them. So what happened? Now all of a sudden I don't want to be too facetious but they had seen the Lord [that is to say, the Gulf States said they would join a coalition against ISIS]. Now we have the President's been able to put together a coalition of our Sunni neighbors, because America can't once again go into a Muslim nation and be seen as the aggressor it has to be led by Sunnis to go and attack a Sunni organization."

Paradoxically, John Hannah perhaps with the benefit of experience had this to say about Obama's Syria policy, referring to Obama's June 2015 meeting with Gulf leaders at Camp David. Hannah noted that having "stressed his understanding of the threat Iran poses to the region":

"[Obama] let loose with this little gem: The Arabs, according to the president of the United States, need to learn from Iran's example. In fact, they need to take a page out of the playbook of the Qods Force, by which he meant developing their own local proxies capable of going toe-to-toe with Iran's agents and defeating them. The president seemed to marvel at the fact that from Hezbollah to the Houthis to the Iraqi militias, Iran has such a deep bench of effective proxies willing to advance its interests.

"Where, he asked, are their equivalent on the Sunni side? Why, he wanted to know in particular, have the Saudis and their partners not been able to cultivate enough Yemenis to carry the burden of the fight against the Houthis? The Arabs, Obama suggested, badly need to develop a toolbox that goes beyond the brute

force of direct intervention. Instead, they need to, be subtler, sneakier, more effective, well, just more like Iran.”

To which John Hannah reflected (clearly now with the benefit of experience):

“Think about it. Feeling threatened, desperate, uncertain of U.S. support, and in an existential death match with an intensely sectarian Shiite Iran, who do you think the Wahhabis are most likely to turn to as potential proxies in a pinch? AQAP in Yemen? Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria? The Islamic State in Iraq? Impossible, you say? Maybe. But maybe not.

“The past isn’t necessarily prologue, but it’s certainly reason to proceed very, very cautiously. The president appears to have a special infatuation with the relatively low cost, under-the-radar utility of black ops, covert action, and paramilitary activities. He also seems eager, even desperate, to ease the burdens of U.S. global leadership by compelling difficult allies to step up and police their own neighborhoods.

“Combine these impulses together and it all sounds great in theory as a means of countering Iran. But this is the Middle East and the coming jihad vs. jihad sectarian conflagration is only just getting started. So be careful what you wish for.”

### **Obama’s Muddle**

Hence the nature of the mess in Syria: Sometimes it is just not possible to “square a circle” by conceding a little to all sides to domestic “hawks,” to the Special Ops industry, to Gulf allies – whilst trying to hold on to the line of no decisive U.S. military intervention. Semantics and “horse-trading” aside, no matter how frequent the re-branding, Al-Qaeda/Al-Nusra and their ilk (Ahrar Ash-Sham, etc.), cannot be conceived as “moderate” in a peculiarly British “Weybridge” sense, nor in any other sense.

Tom Friedman put it well: “Obama has been right in his ambivalence about getting deeply involved in Syria. But he’s never had the courage of his own ambivalence to spell out his reasoning to the American people. He keeps letting himself get pummeled into doing and saying things that his gut tells him won’t work, so he gets the worst of all worlds: His rhetoric exceeds the policy, and the policy doesn’t work.”

Not surprisingly, then, some in America are (cautiously) beginning to see President Putin’s military initiative as the only way to cut the Gordian knot and release President Obama from his “knot” of ambivalence: Let Russia and its allies defeat ISIS, and let “the farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil

conflict” – in Obama’s words become somehow assimilated into the political process.

Now that could become an “achievement.”

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