

# THE ANGRY ARAB: Lebanon's New Government Faces Old Overseers

Interference by Gulf and Western governments in Beirut's affairs has been increasing steadily, writes As'ad AbuKhalil for **Consortium News**.

By **As'ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



After nine months of delays and political feuding, Lebanon finally has a new government. The parliament will begin in a few days the discussion of the cabinet's statement (which contains the program of the new government).

The news of the government's formation was first announced by the UAE ambassador in Lebanon, which is significant because Western media coverage of Lebanon (which is entirely slanted to cover whatever is of interest to Israel) rarely entails discussion of the dominant UAE-Saudi influence and clout in Lebanon.

The Israeli narrative about Lebanon—to the effect that there is Iran and Hizbullah but no one else there—has prevailed in much of the Western coverage. Lebanon, both in the past and today, is an arena of regional and international conflict, and the sectarian parties in the country attach themselves—since the 19<sup>th</sup> century—to this or that outside power.

David Hale, the American undersecretary of state for political affairs, visited Lebanon in January to make clear that the U.S. would not tolerate a Hizbullah takeover of the

Ministry of Public Health; or any service ministry for that matter. Hale went further and indicated what the “kind” of government in Lebanon is of interest to the U.S. government. Such heavy-handed interference in Lebanese affairs does not cause much consternation among Western media and D.C. think tanks who are busy with Russian ads on Facebook during the last presidential election.

### **Filling a Vacuum**

The formation of Lebanese governments has never been a domestic affair. But since 2005, when the Syrian regime was forced – by domestic and international pressures – to withdraw its troops from Lebanon (in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri), Gulf and Western governments have been steadily filling the power vacuum.

The U.S., for example, often has a say about ministers it trusts and approves of. The March 14 coalition – pro-U.S., pro-Saudi and comprising mostly rightist Sunni, Druze, and some Christian political forces in Lebanon – always took that into consideration. By the same token, the Syrian regime had its ministerial preferences. But the role of Iran has been wildly exaggerated largely because the relationship between Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hizbullah since 1992, and Iran is not a replica of the Saudi regime’s relationship with its Lebanese clients (or the relationship between the U.S. and its clients for that matter).

Sa`d Hariri, the prime minister, and Walid Jumblat, the Druze political leader and head of the Progressive Socialist Party who is notorious for his political oscillations and

shifts, take orders from the Saudi regime and the U.S.

By contrast, Nasrallah has far more influence in his camp. It is fair to say that the Iranian regime seeks Nasrallah's say and counsel more than the other way around. Nasrallah is a chief policy maker for Iranian regional policies in the Arab East. None of the clients of the Saudi-U.S. coalition ever reached that level of clout or decision making—not even Rafiq Hariri, who was as good in taking Saudi orders as his son.

### **False Cheering for Feminism**

The new government has four female ministers, which is a record for Lebanon and the region. And some Western governments and media were cheering the appointment of a woman as interior minister, which is a first for an Arab country. Their warped understanding of feminism may one day lead them to cheer the appointment of a woman as chief of the secret police or the division for torture within the secret police. None of the female ministers have a feminist agenda and the new government showed its insensitivity to women when it announced the creation of a new ministry for the “rehabilitation of women and youth.”

Later, in response to feminist uproar, the name was changed to “empowerment of women and youth.” But the government did not understand that the complaint was not only about the name; linking women with youth and children is a classical sexist view. But this is not surprising for Sa`d Hariri who, in the last cabinet, assigned a man to head a ministry of women's affairs.

There was a lot of attention about the entrance of Hizbullah

into the new cabinet. But Hizbullah has been represented in parliament since the early 1990s and (since 2005) in cabinets. The U.S. has, yet again, expressed its disapproval of the representation of Hizbullah in government and all Western governments raised alarm over the news that Hizbullah (for electoral reasons) would be insisting on a service-based ministry. Those ministries often receive Western aid and consultancy, and the U.S. did not want any USAID money to land in Hizbullah hands.

Hizbullah rejected Western pressures at first but later succumbed to those pressures by appointing a physician (said to be the personal physician of Nasrallah, although it is likely that he has more than one physician) who is not an official member of the party. The U.S. responded by threatening sanctions if Hizbullah members or fighters were to receive aid or money from the state budget. This of course is bizarre because Hizbullah members and fighters—like other Lebanese citizens—do receive certain benefits (social security, or health coverage or loans, etc) from the state budget. The U.S. had to register its disapproval but it is unlikely that it will do more than what it normally does: deny Hizbullah leaders the chance to come to the U.S. to visit Disney Land or Disney World, and to freeze the non-existent assets of Hizbullah leaders.

### **US Keeps Eye on the Weapons**

The U.S. also takes a firm stance against the arms of Hizbullah. U.S. and Western officials never tire of reiterating that the Lebanese Army should have a monopoly of arms in Lebanon (of course, the Lebanese people have historically always been armed). But this Western stance is

now weaker than ever: the minutes of the last meeting of the Higher Defense Council of Lebanon were leaked to *Al-Akhbar*, the leftwing Beirut daily, a few weeks ago, and in them, the director of Army Intelligence conceded that the Lebanese Army can't stand in the face of the Israeli army for more than 24 hours.

This exposes the real motives behind U.S. insistence on the Lebanese Army's role in national defense: the U.S. wants Lebanon to be weak as it has been prior to the rise of the national resistance (first undertaken by leftist and secular groups and later by Hizbullah and others). Since 1948 the U.S. has been key in denying Lebanon the means to defend itself against Israeli aggression. But since 2000, when Israel was forced into a humiliating withdrawal from South Lebanon, Israel has been deterred from attacking Lebanon because it knows that there is now a Lebanese force which—unlike the Lebanese Army historically—would not stand by while it attacks and kills at will.

The new government faces a severe economic crisis. While the Lebanese pound remains relatively stable (by virtue of the constant intervention of the Central Bank) economic growth has slowed down. Promises of Western and Gulf assistance has only translated into a trickle, while the Saudi and UAE governments still impose a tourist boycott of Lebanon (citizens from Gulf countries formed the bulk of the tourism sector).

Economic growth has slowed down and the Syrian refugees have been blamed for the economic crisis by politicians of the right. Furthermore, the Western and Gulf governments have promised a package of loans (under the Cedar conference

in [Rome](#)) provided Lebanon enacts a series of “reforms.” Those reforms will only serve to tie Lebanon deeper into Western governments and lending institutions. Lebanon already has the highest debt per capita of any country in the world, and the “reforms” imposed by Western governments will only sink Lebanon deeper into debt and political subservience.

The sovereignty of developing countries is increasingly jeopardized by virtue of foreign debts and U.S. military intervention and training of local armies. In the time of the Cold War, developing countries could maneuver between the two rivals which gave them more power and more sovereignty. Lebanon today is an Iranian vassal in Western media propaganda but more like a vassal of Western and Gulf governments in reality, the presence of Hizbullah arms notwithstanding.

As'ad AbuKhalil is a Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of the “Historical Dictionary of Lebanon” (1998), “Bin Laden, Islam and America’s New War on Terrorism” (2002), and “The Battle for Saudi Arabia” (2004). He tweets as [@asadabukhalil](#)

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## The Unwritten Rule Between the US and Hizbullah

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

By As`ad AbuKhalil  
in Beirut

*Special to Consortium News*



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

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

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

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

### **Hizbollah Wins Votes**

Hizbullah candidates, by contrast, did very well, proving yet again that the party has the overwhelming support of the Shi`ite community.

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

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

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

The U.S. has never considered its presence in Lebanon during



the 1980s – on the side of Israeli militias notorious for committing war crimes– as an occupying force. But that is how many Lebanese saw it.

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

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

Hizbullah, which is both a political party and a fighting force, officially established itself in 1985 with the issuance of its manifesto to the world. But it was born a few years earlier, during the tumultuous and horrific events that surrounded the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when the suffering of the southern Lebanese population spawned a new wave of radicalization that was sponsored and supported by the Iranian regime.

### **Starting Point Conflict**

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

A long-running dispute surrounds the question of who carried out the attacks. The U.S. remains convinced that Hizbullah and that one of its key leaders – Imad Mughniyyah

personally—was responsible. After the attacks the U.S. and Israel labelled Hizbullah a terrorist organization.

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

Despite the heated rhetoric that the two sides use against each other, the U.S. and Hizbullah have avoided direct military confrontation over the years. Instead they have fought proxy battles, from Iraq to Yemen to Syria. Even the U.S. assassination of Imad Mughniyyah in 2008 was not—from the standpoint of the U.S. government—really a violation of the unspoken rule of direct combat since the U.S. has made it clear that it held Mughniyyah responsible for the attacks on U.S. targets in Lebanon.

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

### **A Turning Point**

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

Since then, the might and skill of Hizbullah in facing Israeli occupation and aggression seem only to increase with every new war and every new confrontation. Regardless of

one's assessment of Hizbullah's intervention in Syria, its fighters accumulated a unique battle experience there, along different fronts—which can only decrease Israeli confidence in its abilities vis-à-vis the party in the future round of war.

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

But Israel, since its founding, has tried to make its enemies the enemies of the U.S. During the long years of the Cold War, the Israeli propaganda machine was desperately searching the Arabic press to find statements that could be twisted to portray Israel's enemies – whether Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser; or Ba`thist leaders, or the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat – as Soviet tools.

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

### **Keeping the Fight Covert**

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

Israel, however, after suffering that stunning defeat in July of 2006, has become increasingly intent on having the U.S. engage Hizbullah directly. This is something that has

been made clear in the speeches of Israeli leaders and in the unending supply of legislation sponsored by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, targeting Hizbullah.

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

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

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## The Meaning of the Recent Lebanese Election (and How Hariri Suffered a Stinging Defeat)

While Western media decried Hizbullah's victory in last month's election, any notion that the Shi'ite party can dominate Lebanese politics is at best an exaggeration, says As'ad AbuKhalil.

*Part One of this article can be read [here](#).*

**By As'ad AbuKhalil** *Special to Consortium News*



One can't evaluate the results of last month's Lebanese elections without understanding the real power of the legislative branch, namely that Lebanon's bizarre sectarian system is a deformed version of a parliamentary democracy.

The president ruled supreme prior to the 1989 Ta'if reforms, which ended the 15-year civil war and restructured the Lebanese political system. He was able to tailor the results of the Lebanese elections to his liking. This was done either through outright rigging (as Kamil Sham'un did in 1957 with U.S. help) or by gerrymandering.

Furthermore, the Lebanese president (who has to be a Maronite Christian) had absolute power and would often push the parliament in the direction he wanted.

But the Lebanese political system was thoroughly changed after 1989, and the powers of the president were greatly diminished, reflecting the changes in the balance of power between the various warring sects and factions in the war.

New powers were given to the Council of Ministers (the Cabinet), although there is still an unending constitutional debate over whether the Ta'if reforms really shifted the powers of the president to the Council of Ministers or to the office of the prime minister (who has to be a Sunni Muslim). The speaker of parliament

(who has to be a Shi'ite Muslim) was awarded an extension of his term from one year to four, although he remains largely without meaningful authority.

The real power in Lebanon's parliament rests with a handful of key *zu`ama'*, sectarian political bosses, many of whom became war lords in the civil war, and not in the committees where draft bills are theoretically formulated. More often than not, the *zu`ama* meet in private and agree on key decisions and policies. Furthermore, these political bosses all have foreign sponsors, which means that foreign embassies often play a key role in the political decision-making process.

Former Prime Minister Salim Huss told me in 2000 that the U.S. embassy once handed him a draft law on artistic and intellectual piracy and requested that the parliament adopt it as is. The influence of the American-Saudi alliance over their Lebanese clients is arguably greater than Iran's or Syria's over theirs: Hizbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah's influence within his camp can't be compared to Sa'd Hariri's in his.

To be sure, Syria exercised supreme control over Lebanese affairs prior to 2005, but often in conjunction with the Saudis and Americans. Ironically it was the Americans and Saudis, with France, that pushed Syria out of Lebanon in 2005, and now the Washington-Riyadh role clashes and competes with the role of the other camp, now headed by Nasrallah.

Thus, Nasrallah is not only acting on behalf of his party, but also of the Iranian-Syrian alliance in Lebanon and beyond. The leaders of the March 14 alliance, which was formed in the so-called Cedar Revolution after the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 and which eventually led to the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon, never had that much decision-making powers in their camp: they were mere obedient tools.

This became clear when March 14 leader Sa'd Hariri was ordered in late 2017 strapped to his chair and slapped repeatedly in Riyadh before being ordered by his Saudi masters to read a resignation letter on Saudi TV. After returning to politics in Beirut, Hariri tried to deny that he was humiliated. He now expresses thanks and gratitude for the "support" he received from his former jailer, Muhammad bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince.

### **A Hizbullah Victory**

Hizbullah's fortunes in the May 6 parliamentary election, the first in nine years, attracted the most international attention. It was clear that Western governments and media were invested in the Lebanese elections when days before the vote *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* both wrote features on a

lone Shi`ite candidate named Yahya Shamas.

No one—outside of Lebanon—had ever heard of this man (although I am sure he is well-represented in U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration files). He was featured in major U.S. media because he ran against Hizbullah's list in the Ba`lbak electoral district.

Shamas was convicted of drug smuggling (and jailed) during the years of Syrian political domination, although the conflict between him and Ghazi Kan`an, the head of Syrian intelligence at the time, was over their "share" of the spoils. (Shamas lost, although he—like many other defeated candidates—contested the results and appealed to the constitutional court).

The election results were a victory for Hizbullah, which the U.S. State Department lists as a terrorist organization, but that doesn't mean Hizbullah will "dominate" the Lebanese parliament as some Western media headlines would have one believe.

Yet how does one measure Hizbullah's political fortunes from the results? If measured by sheer parliamentary seats, the party won only 14. All Hizbullah candidates won, except for one candidate in Jubayl, and that was because the election there is determined by the majority Christian vote.

The number of Hizbullah seats is not big but the party—when it comes to cabinet and parliamentary representation—always settles for far less than its actual political weight perhaps to avoid alarming its enemies in Lebanon and beyond. In fact it allows its junior Shi`ite partner, Amal Movement, to have more seats in parliament and the cabinet.

Amal obtained 17 seats. An examination of the preferential votes obtained by individual Hizbullah candidates versus Amal candidates indicates that Hizbullah is clearly more popular than Amal in predominantly Shi`ite areas, however.

But the ability of the close allies to maintain total political representation of all Shi`ite seats in parliament is always seen—more by Hizbullah enemies than its supporters—as a plebiscite on the matter of armed resistance and the preservation of Hizbullah militias.

The two Shi`ite partners form a joint political presence for the second most seats—29—in the Lebanese parliament. Their chief rival, the Sunni Future Movement (of the Hariri family) obtained only 21 seats, down from 35 seats in the last election.

This was a huge blow to the Saudi camp in Lebanon, and to the Hariri leadership. The Hariri Movement lost much of its popularity for a variety of reasons

including the political incompetence of its leader, Sa`d Hariri, and his declining financial powers.

He does not enjoy the same fortune which he inherited from his father, and the Saudi camp (and apparently many Lebanese voters) do not trust him fully after the Saudis humiliated him. Thus Saudi Arabia denied him the largesse it had showered on his movement in the 2009 election.

The setback for the Hariri movement was also the result of a changing electoral system in which proportional representation in medium size districts caused Hariri's Future Movement to lose Christian and Shi`ite candidates that it used to carry with ease. This defeat put an end to the Hariri political monopoly over Sunni political representation in Lebanon. The Hariri's decline among Sunnis was due to their Sunni rivals who are allies of Shi`ite Hizbullah mostly because of the latter's armed resistance against Israel and their opposition to Hariri family economic policies in Lebanon.

In a nation where the national army is weak, Hizbullah is seen, even by some Sunnis, as the best defense against a southern "neighbor" that has several times invaded and occupied Lebanon. Some Christians have seen Hizbullah of late as a defender of Lebanon's eastern flank against ISIS and Nusrat fighters in Syria.

Even in Beirut, the stronghold of the Hariri family, Sa`d Hariri had to share representation of the capital with a rival billionaire (Fu`ad Makhuzumi) and a head of an Islamist organization (Al-Ahbash or the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects), which is aligned with the Syrian regime. To guarantee victory in some districts (namely Akkar and Biqa`) Hariri was obliged to invite to his lists known supporters of the Syrian regime.

### **The Outcome for Christians**

Among Christian voters, the Lebanese Forces (favored by the Saudi regime) improved its representation, obtaining 15 seats (up from 8 seats).

The biggest loser among Maronite Christians was the Phalanges Party, which shrunk from five to three seats. The Phalanges Party now belongs to the history books, where it will be remembered for its particularly brutal role as an ally of Israel in the Lebanese civil war.

The Saudi-backed Lebanese Forces (LF) now carries the mantle of right-wing sectarianism, which was pioneered by the Phalanges. (LF was originally a military organization operating under the Phalanges umbrella during the war).

The Lebanese Forces however had a run for its money by the equally right-wing Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), which advocated sectarian and racist stances



against Palestinians and Syrians. The head of the FPM, Foreign Minister Jubran Basil, son-in-law of Lebanese President Michel `Awn, disturbed his alliance with Hizbullah by going far in mimicking the Phalanges' ideology. He even paid tribute to pro-Israel war criminal, Bashir Gemayyel, a senior Phalanges official and commander of the LF who was assassinated in 1982 days after his installation as president by the invading Israeli occupation army.

We can either measure the election results merely by the political parties performances or by their stance toward Hizbullah and their armed forces.

If we take the latter as the criterion, then Hizbullah and its allies clearly won and now control more than half of the seats in parliament (close to 70 seats). The commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Qasim Suleimani, was mistaken when he bragged a few days ago that Hizbullah won 74 seats because his count includes opponents of Hizbullah who won on the lists of the Free Patriotic Movement.

But arithmetic calculations alone do not explain Lebanese politics. Deep sectarian divisions, and the willingness of the Saudi camp in Lebanon to engage in blatant sectarian agitation, impose limitations on any political victory by any side in the country.

Hizbullah knows full well that sectarian warfare is the last refuge of political losers in Lebanon. Furthermore, Hizbullah's narrow religious-sectarian doctrine prevents it from ever being able to rule over all Lebanon, no matter how much support it may enjoy. In other words, Lebanon has not changed much—the results of the elections notwithstanding.

**As'ad AbuKhalil is a Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of the *Historical Dictionary of Lebanon* (1998), *Bin Laden, Islam & America's New 'War on Terrorism'* (2002), and *The Battle for Saudi Arabia* (2004). He also runs the popular [blog The Angry Arab News Service](#).**

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## The West & Gulf Couldn't Sway These Lebanese Elections

Western media got interested in this month's Lebanese election hoping "their"

candidates would win. It became a different story when Hizbullah gained the most, explains As'ad AbuKhalil.

By As'ad AbuKhalil *Special to Consortium News*



The recent Lebanese parliamentary election generated a lot of publicity in Western media. To be sure, free elections are rare in the Middle East, and Western media get excited over the prospects of success for what they dub as “pro-Western” candidates or coalitions anywhere. Also because foes of Israel and the U.S. were in the running, Western media become automatically invested in the outcome. This time, Western media decided that Hizbullah won “a majority of seats” in the election—as the headline of *The Financial Times* had it. The results were certainly a blow to Western and Gulf regimes who invest—politically and financially—heavily in Lebanese elections.

We can't really talk about free elections in the Middle East—or anywhere else in the developing world for that matter. Not because people there don't want them but essentially because Western governments and Gulf regimes won't allow it. To be fair, the U.S. is clearly in favor of free elections, but only when the results guarantee a victory for its puppets. Thus, when Hamas won the legislative elections of 2006 (which the U.S. had been insisting on), the U.S. not only refused to recognize the free expressions of the Palestinian people but the U.S. worked on a covert operation to undermine the results and to overthrow Hamas in Gaza.

Historically, the U.S. (among other outside parties, chiefly Gulf regimes) intervened heavily in Lebanese elections through the provision of cash payments to its favored right-wing, anti-communist candidates. For instance, the 1947 election lives on as one of the most corrupt in Lebanese history, and former CIA agent, Wilbur Eveland, wrote about his adventures of driving to the residence of then president, Kamil Sham'un, with a load of cash to ensure that the right-candidates win. But the cash wasn't really necessary because Sham'un forged the election anyway and arranged for the defeat of his opponents.

In 1968, the U.S. was most likely behind the rise of the far-right coalition of "the tripartite alliance," which included the Phalanges, who swept through the election and, in few years, would—with U.S. help—trigger the Lebanese civil war. (New U.S. archival materials show the extremely close relations between those parties and U.S. and Israel).

But the U.S. and Saudi Arabia surpassed all previous foreign intervention in Lebanon in the 2009 election, when they threw close to a \$1 billion to sway the vote on the side of the March 14 coalition, which included the Muslim Brotherhood and right-wing groups—all dubbed "pro-Western" by U.S. media. The victor was arranged although the election was very close: no one side was able to rule without veto power by the other side.

In this election, the Saudis didn't spend as much as previously probably because they thought it wouldn't much difference since a new electoral system had changed the rules. But Western and Gulf governments convened a special economic conference in Paris to prop up the leadership of Sa'd Hariri, who claimed in the wake of the conference that he would be create no less than 900,000 jobs.

#### Elections in 'Democracies'

Elections in democratic political systems are merely some of the people selecting representatives who speak on behalf of "all the people." The propaganda about the virtue of elections is highly exaggerated in order to provide the political system with much more political legitimacy than warranted.

In the U.S., there is still a clear agenda to suppress wide political participation. The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world which holds the vote on a working day—and in the winter where much of the East coast is buried under rain and snow. Furthermore, the U.S. requires voter registration, when most democracies don't. The low voter turnout in the U.S. is by design, and not by default. If the U.S. were to adopt a proportional representation system—which both parties won't allow because they enjoy holding the exclusive monopoly over political representation—voter turnout would increase. Most world

democracies have—at least partially or at some level—adopted proportional representation.

The leftist coalition during the Lebanese civil war years, the Lebanese National Movement, proposed political reforms in 1975. They included—among other things—the adoption of proportional representation at the national level, with Lebanon designated as one electoral district. The political class rejected that because they preferred the single-member district (at a small local level) since it facilitates the utilization of cash in swaying voters. Also, Lebanese national proportional representation wouldn't fit well with regional sectarian leaderships.

The May 6 Lebanese election took place nine years after the previous one. Regional conflicts and Lebanese internal turmoil gave sectarian leaders the excuse to postpone the elections repeatedly. Sectarian leaders also had a hard time agreeing on a new electoral law. But the election of Gen. Michel Aoun to the presidency in 2016 expedited the process of finally holding a ballot. His parliamentary bloc had been vociferous in calling for new elections. After long months of acrimonious negotiations, the sectarian leaders agreed on a new electoral law.

Hizbullah and the progressives in Lebanon called for a proportional representation system, while Hariri and his allies fought against it. Hizbullah was willing to risk losing a few seats in return for the election of some of its allies from different sects, while Hariri knew that his broad coalition in parliament would lose substantially because most of his Christian MPs were elected in specially-designed districts where the majority Muslims vote for Christian and Muslim MPs.

The design of electoral districts is not a simple matter in Lebanon because the system has to balance different political interests with a sectarian arithmetic formulae (which is incorporated into the political system of the country). For example, the top posts of government (presidency, speakership, and prime ministership) are distributed among Maronites, Shi'ites, and Sunnis respectively.

Elections to the 128-seat Lebanese parliament must split seats evenly between Christians and Muslims though Muslims surpassed Christians demographically long before the 1975 civil war. It is estimated that Christians are now no more than a third of the population. There is a quota for Christians in the Lebanese parliament that keeps up the pretense that they are half the population no matter how different the demographic reality. In fact, the Lebanese state refuses to conduct a census for fear of upsetting Christians. The last census was conducted in 1932.

So Lebanese leaders agreed on a new electoral law that would mix the proportional representation system with the single-member district. They arrived at a law which divided Lebanese governorates as electoral districts but then gave the voter the choice to rank one candidate on the electoral list as his/her "favored" candidate, which basically prioritized sectarian preferences of voters. The whole purpose of proportional representation was defeated.

The law was quite complicated and the low voter turnout (around 49 %, less than the 2009 election) seems to confirm that many voters and even Interior Ministry experts did not fully understand the rules. The low turnout can also be explained by the low level of enthusiasm among voters and the diminished sense of expectations for change. Furthermore, sectarian leaders in Lebanon suppress the vote by not allowing 18-year-olds to vote. If they did it's estimated that it would substantially increase the Muslim voters—especially Shi`ites.

*Part Two will look closely at the election's winners and losers and what it means.*

**As'ad AbuKhalil is a Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of the *Historical Dictionary of Lebanon* (1998), *Bin Laden, Islam & America's New 'War on Terrorism'* (2002), and *The Battle for Saudi Arabia* (2004). He also runs the popular [blog The Angry Arab News Service](#).**

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# Delusions and Genocide: A Reply to Diana Johnstone

Consortium News published an [article](#) on May 4 by Diana Johnstone, in which she critiqued an article by Tony McKenna, who has asked for the right to reply.

**Editor's Note:** Consortium News published an [article](#) on May 4 by Diana Johnstone called, "Trotskyist Delusions: Obsessed with Stalin, They See Betrayed Revolutions Everywhere." In the piece, Johnstone critiqued an article by Tony McKenna, who has asked for the right to reply. We are publishing that reply here, with this disclaimer and notice to our readers that we do not endorse McKenna's views on Syria. We feel they display a profound misunderstanding of the tragic circumstances in that country. To give just two examples: McKenna's assertion that it was the Free Syrian Army and other rebels that drove ISIS out of Syria and into Iraq, while ignoring all the many, more powerful forces arrayed against it, such as Syrian, Russian, Iranian, Lebanese, Kurdish and even American and its allied forces (who to some extent fought against ISIS in Syria), is a gross distortion of what has actually happened.

The second example shows the essential error of McKenna and those that agree with him: the failure to understand the nature of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad. His government emerged in the conflict as the far lesser evil to foreign-backed jihadists. Assad has never threatened the West the way ISIS has not only threatened, but attacked it. Assad did not kill Christians, Shia, Yazidi, women and other minorities just because of their identities, the way the jihadists have. McKenna's assertion that it is Islamophobic to call most rebels in Syria terrorists, while comparing that to Israel labeling all Gazans " Hamas terrorists," ignores the fact that Gazans and Hamas are resisting an occupation, while ISIS actually ran a particularly brutal occupation of both Syrian and Iraqi territory. He also ignores the role the West and Gulf Arabs played in allowing ISIS to flourish.

By Tony McKenna



I read with some interest Diana Johnstone's recent article in *Consortium News* – 'Trotskyist Delusions: Obsessed with Stalin, They See Betrayed Revolutions Everywhere' (May 4, 2018) which was a response to an article of my own – 'Revolution and Counter Revolution in Syria' (*International Socialist Review*, March 1, 2018). Johnstone's article doubles as an attack on me and also a broader 'critique' of a 'delusional' Trotskyism whose ridiculous ideals have sinister real world consequences; that it to say, they allow said Trotskyists 'to align...with U.S imperialism. The obsession with permanent revolution ends up providing an ideological alibi for permanent war.'

In the comments section underneath, the same charge was echoed *ad infinitum*. I am – either consciously or unconsciously – a supporter of Western Imperialism, at least with regard to Syria. This is the crux of the issue, and therefore something I'd like to address.

I do not support US military intervention in Syria. I do not support Israeli intervention in Syria. I was against the recent airstrikes which were launched by the US with backing from Britain and France. But I am also against the Russian and Iranian military interventions which have taken place in Syria. The side I am not against – oddly enough for a 'delusional Trotskyist' – are the Syrian people themselves. You know, the same guys who have been strafed, bombed, gassed, burnt, raped, tortured and systematically murdered for a sustained seven year period by their ghoulish dictator and his military apparatus – in collusion, of course, with the cash, weaponry, troops and planes provided by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah.

Now I am going to emphasise the role of these latter state actors over others (shock, gasp – even over Western Imperialism!) because they are the ones who, in bolstering the Assad regime, have turned the country into a smouldering, ashen graveyard. From March 11, 2011, to March 1, 2016, the regime was responsible for 183,827 civilian deaths, which accounts for a catastrophic 94.7 percent of all civilian deaths. UN investigators quite correctly described this as amounting to an 'extermination' of the civilian population. This is the regime which Johnstone and her acolytes rally around. Progressive, radical 'anti-imperialist' politics at their finest and most fragrant, served up in a batch, with that extra special dash of civilian mass murder.

Then again, perhaps all those dead Syrian civilians were all ISIS sympathisers or the like. Or even if they weren't, perhaps those civilians had to be killed as collateral damage because they were harbouring rebels of a sinister Islamic fundamentalist bent in their midst. That is certainly what Assad tells us. It is what the Russians would have you believe. Ironic isn't it? As we watch, in real time, the murderous military machine of the Israeli state mow down unarmed

Palestinian protestors taking part in the Great March of Return, Israeli propaganda feeds us a very similar ideological rationale. The 'great march' protestors were, in reality, 'violent fundamentalists'. Or at the very least, they had been infiltrated by 'violent fundamentalists', they had been weaponised by Hamas.

Is there any of us that take such claims seriously? And yet, in the case of Syria, we are more easily swayed by such an insidious logic, we readily accept it as reality. We take it as an accomplished fact that the rebels are Islamist fundamentalists, and where and when more secular currents emerge, we take it as given that these will eventually give up the ghost before rabid religious interests. Is the Syrian, predominantly Muslim population, inherently susceptible to the most rabid strains of Islamic fundamentalism? Or could it be that it is precisely this type of assumption, with all its islamophobic connotations, which has led to the lack of support for secular forces in their struggle against Assad.

### **FSA Smashed ISIS**

In late 2013 a coalition of rebel forces of many different political shades (some secular, some religiously fundamentalist), led by the secular inclined Free Syrian Army, took a break from the bloody grapple with their murderous dictator in order to smash ISIS to pieces – driving them from Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Raqqa, sending the black clad, sword wielding fanatics scurrying back into the Iraqi desert.

This was little covered in the press, of course, and, generally speaking, the rebels were given scant financial backing internationally as they conducted their heroic rout. In contrast, entities like ISIS are heavily subsidised by powerful foreign interests. The Russians and Iranians pour billions into the Assad regime. Locked between the snapping jaws of these snarling leviathans, the more secular inclined forces are given little support, and as a result have had their political presence diminished.

And that is why I support the right of the rebels to get arms from wherever they can. That includes, I am afraid to say, the U.S. state – or indeed any other. Does that make me a *de facto* supporter of Western Imperialism? Let's consider this. Just imagine being a member of that harrowing number caught between the Scylla of the fundamentalist extremists and the Charybdis of the Assad regime. You are fighting for everything you have ever known and what is more you are fighting with meagre supplies against overwhelming forces, and in the most perilous of circumstances. Surely you would accept arms and money from the devil himself if he offered them, no? For the simplest reason of all. The alternative is annihilation.



## Who is the Idealist?

Johnstone's whole critique of me rests on the fact that I am some sort of 'head in the clouds, Trotskyist idealist' who is naïve to the way the real political forces are played out on the ground. But in my view she is the idealist, if she somehow imagines that any rebel in that situation – in the face of an Assad regime which is genocidal in its intent and which has been fortified by billions in Russian arms and support – if she imagines that such a rebel should demur from using more effective and up-to-date weaponry, casting it to one side, on the grounds that it has been provided by the U.S. – and instead abandon themselves to the slaughter.

Then again, I don't think Johnstone troubles herself to think about the people on the ground all that much. Methodologically speaking, there is a reason for this, and it is revealed in her piece. In her account she mobilizes the figure of the Trotskyist as the bogeyman *par excellence*; she writes of Trotskyism in the following, withering terms: 'The Trotskyists keep yearning for a new revolution, just like the Bolshevik revolution. Yes, but the Bolshevik revolution ended in Stalinism.'

I know something about Stalinism. You might even say I wrote the book on it. And in that book I noted the very opposite from that which Johnstone, and so many others, have glibly asserted; I noted that, in fact, the Bolshevik Revolution did not produce Stalinism from within itself. In October 1917 the Bolshevik Party had a political mandate which came from the workers, soldiers, students and a significant proportion of the poorer layers of the peasantry.

Such a mandate was channelled through the 'soviets', the workers' councils which had sprung up in over 300 cities and towns across Russia. In response to the October Revolution, and let me emphasise this – *Western Imperialism* – in the form of 14 foreign countries including the US, Britain and France, sent its armies into Russia in order to aid and abet the white counter revolution, as the forces of the ex-monarchy, the industrial capitalists and the dispossessed landowners threw everything they could against the new government in a bloody and protracted three year civil war.

In that conflict, the Bolshevik bureaucracy, the government, managed to cling to power, barely, but the workers and radical peasants who had provided the democratic basis for that power had been exsanguinated in the furore of the civil war. The Stalinist dictatorship was the ultimate expression of the centralisation of a bureaucracy which was made bereft of its social basis, a social basis which had withered in the fire of counterrevolution, and isolated and inward looking, that bureaucracy was now only able to retain its power from above – by purely administrative, militaristic and ultimately totalitarian

means.

### **Lenin's Last Battle**

Of course, capitalist ideologues and defenders of the status quo adore the whole Bolshevism inherently leads to totalitarianism—Lenin inevitably begot Stalin, trope. They do so, not because they have any interest in the historical specificities: the decimation of the industrial proletariat, the destruction of the Soviet democracy, foreign invasion, the movement from revolution to counterrevolution which underpinned that historical process. They remain breezily unconcerned that the last battle of Lenin's life was waged against the encroaching bureaucratic influence of Stalin.

Rather, for them, Bolshevism becomes a cipher. It represents any radical and popular socialist mobilisation which confronts the capitalist system and condemns such an alternative as inevitably destined to mutate into totalitarianism and gulags. The inference, of course, is crystal clear; fundamental change is either utopian or dangerous —*ergo capitalism is the only game in town.*

For all her anti (U.S.) imperialism, for all her hatred of U.S. capitalism, Johnstone shares this sensibility with pro-capitalist ideologues to a tee. For her too, Bolshevism simply led to Stalinism — the historical specificity, the development of the popular revolution, the process of counterrevolution, the civil war — all these processes are either irrelevant or invisible; we are made to understand by Johnstone that revolution per-se 'is more a myth than a reality'. Needless to say, such a methodological presupposition bleeds into and thoroughly permeates her analysis of Syria.

For Johnstone, the revolutionary struggle of the Syrian masses is not flagging because they have been pulverized by the forces of a counter-revolutionary state bolstered by Russian imperial power; no the Syrian masses are wanting because just as Bolshevism innately led to Stalinism, so too their struggle must innately and inevitably lead to 'jihadists taking over the country'. And when you understand, as Johnstone does, that forms of popular power from below are inherently irredeemable, the conclusion flows naturally and easily, and Johnstone does not shy away from stating it. A country 'such as Syria' she informs us, is 'not likely to be "modernized" without a strong ruler.'

In Bashar al-Assad she has found a strong ruler, a strong ruler indeed. And a genocidal one.

**Tony McKenna is a novelist, journalist and philosopher whose work has been featured by many publications including ABC Australia, The Huffington Post, New**

**Internationalist, The United Nations, NewStatesman, The Progressive and New Humanist. His first book “Art Literature and Culture from a Marxist Perspective”, was released by Macmillan in 2015, the second a critically acclaimed biography of Joseph Stalin was published the following year, and in 2017 New Haven Publishing brought out his debut novel “The Dying Light”.**

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## Erasing Obama’s Iran Success

The nihilism of modern American politics extends globally with one side seeking to destroy any positive legacy of the other, as the Trump administration continues its drive to sabotage President Obama’s successful Iran nuclear accord, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Those wishing to kill the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran’s nuclear program, have never given up. The agreement’s ever-lengthening successful record, now more than two years old, of keeping closed all possible pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon ought to have discouraged would-be deal-slayers. But the slayers got a new lease on life with the election of Donald Trump, who, as part of his program of opposing whatever Barack Obama favored and destroying whatever he accomplished, has consistently berated the JCPOA.

The themes that the agreement’s opponents push are now familiar. One of those themes is that the Obama administration was over-eager to get the agreement and consequently gave up the store to conclude the accord. This argument never made sense, given the terms of the JCPOA. The asymmetries in the agreement go against the Iranians, who came under a more intrusive nuclear inspection arrangement than any other country has ever willingly accepted, and who had to fulfill almost all of their obligations to break down and set back their nuclear program before gaining an ounce of additional sanctions relief. But the argument has had the attraction for the opponents of not being directly disprovable as far as any mindset of former officials is concerned, and of jibing with the opponents’ further theme of a mythical “better deal” that supposedly was there for the taking.

An additional theme from the opponents has been that the JCPOA fails to address other Iranian policies and actions that have ritualistically come to be labeled as nefarious, malign, destabilizing behavior (NMDB). This argument hasn’t made sense either, given that it was clear from the outset of negotiations that no

agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program would be possible if the parties negotiating the agreement dumped onto the table their other grievances against each other. Any such futile expansion of the negotiating agenda would have meant that the Iranian nuclear program would have advanced ever closer to the capability of making a bomb *and* there still would have been the NMDB.

Nonetheless, the theme has been a favorite of opponents because it distracts attention from the success of the JCPOA in preventing an Iranian nuke, because there always will be some sort of objectionable Iranian action that can be pointed out, and because the NMDB mantra has now been chanted so much that it has come to be accepted as an unquestioned given.

Josh Meyer recently offered a variant on these themes with an extended [article](#) in *Politico* under the tantalizing title, "The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook". The attention-getting theme that the author pushes is that a task force of the Drug Enforcement Administration investigating drug trafficking and other criminal activity of Lebanese Hezbollah was stymied by "the White House's desire for a nuclear deal with Iran". Unsurprisingly, this theme has been replayed by the usual players dedicated to bashing the JCPOA or anything Obama-related, such as the *Wall Street Journal* [editorial writers](#). Some [Republicans in Congress](#) and even [Eric Trump](#) have echoed the theme.

The 13,000-word article aims to overwhelm with detail. Through the sheer volume of leads, tips, suspicions, and genuine facts, the reader gets the impression of a thoroughly reported piece. And Meyer clearly put a lot of work into it. But as Erik Wemple of the *Washington Post* points out in an [article](#) about the article, Meyer never produces any direct evidence that the White House intentionally impeded the task force's work, much less that any such interference had to do with the impending nuclear agreement. After wading through all the detail, the careful reader can see that the attention-getting thesis about the Obama administration supposedly sacrificing drug and crime enforcement on the altar of the nuclear agreement rests on suspicion and innuendo. It rests on statements such as that some decisions about the Hezbollah case "might have been influenced" by an inter-agency group's awareness of the nuclear negotiations—meaning that, as Wemple notes, the decisions just as easily might not have been influenced by such awareness.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration took numerous tough sanctions and law enforcement actions against Hezbollah, both before and after conclusion of the JCPOA. Meyer includes in his article—and give Meyer credit for this inclusion—statements by former Obama administration officials alluding to those actions. The very separation of the nuclear file from other grievances by or against Iran—which, as noted above, was essential to concluding any nuclear agreement at all—implied that there would *not* be any moratorium on

enforcement actions against Iran's Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Meyer's piece suffers from a sourcing problem in that it relies heavily on just two sources who currently are employed by, or affiliated with, organizations in the forefront of opposing the JCPOA. One of those sources, David Asher, is on an advisory board of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has become mission control for undermining and trying to kill the nuclear agreement.

Whether or not such institutional connections affected what was told to Meyer, the account of a task force within DEA that felt frustrated that the rest of the government did not run fast and run automatically with whatever case it was building has the familiar ring of something that happens regularly, and quite properly and understandably, inside government. Such happening need not have anything to do with White House interference or with any pending international agreement such as the JCPOA. When a team of officials works hard on a project—as this team in DEA that was investigating some of Hezbollah's activities undoubtedly did—its members naturally will feel frustrated by any inter-agency review that keeps the government from acting fully and immediately on whatever the team came up with (by, say, quickly filing a criminal indictment in federal court). Such review is vital. Typically there are not just one but several important national interests and equities that need to be considered, and that go beyond what the more narrowly focused team members would have had in mind.

In the case of Hezbollah and drug-running, those other considerations would have included such things as the possibility of violent responses, the cost of possibly losing sources of information on the group being investigated, and the legal soundness of any criminal case brought to court. Some of these considerations get misleadingly presented in Meyer's article as if they were part of some Obama administration effort to put brakes on legal actions against Hezbollah for the sake of preserving the nuclear agreement. For example, former counterterrorism adviser Lisa Monaco is said to have "expressed concerns about using RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] laws against top Hezbollah leaders and about the possibility of reprisals". As the *Post's* Wemple observes, " 'Expressing concerns' about certain law enforcement strategies may have been Monaco's way of, like, using her governmental experience to sharpen U.S. policy, rather than working as the cog in an alleged plot to take it easy on Hezbollah."

Beyond the multiple severe weaknesses in Meyer's argument about what the Obama administration did or did not do are two important pieces of context that he never addresses. One concerns just what difference a more aggressive campaign against Hezbollah during the period in question, even if it were possible, would

have made. Meyer makes it sound as if doing or not doing everything that this one task force in DEA wanted to do was the difference between crippling or not crippling a grave security threat. In an interview on NPR, Meyer asserted that the Obama administration “did allow a group that was a regionally focused militia-slash-political organization with a terrorist wing to become a much more wealthy global criminal organization that has a lot of money that can now be used to bankroll terrorist and military actions around the world.” No, it didn’t. Even if one were to believe everything that Meyer’s piece insinuates about an alleged White House obstructionist operation motivated by nuclear negotiations, this would not have made Hezbollah “a much more wealthy” organization, much less have made it more likely to conduct terrorist and military actions “around the world”.

Hezbollah has been in existence for more than three decades. During that time it has grown into a strong and multifaceted organization, including being recognized as a major political movement, with seats in the Lebanese parliament and portfolios in the Lebanese government. Money-making criminal operations have long been a part of Hezbollah’s activity, and investigations and legal action—through several U.S. administrations—have long been a part of the U.S. response to that activity. What one disgruntled team in DEA wanted to do during one administration was a minor episode in this story, not the make-or-break development that Meyer portrays it as.

Another piece of context applies to the whole theme, of which Meyer’s article is one manifestation, about the Obama administration supposedly drooling over a prospective nuclear agreement with Iran and giving it priority over everything else. It wasn’t Obama who gave the specter of an Iranian nuclear weapon overriding priority. It was other people who did that, and especially people who today lead the charge for aggressive confrontation with Iran and for killing the JCPOA. Well before the negotiations that would lead to the JCPOA ever began, the rallying cry of these forces was that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be one of the gravest dangers the United States ever faced. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney identified this possibility as the single most serious security threat against the United States. Most prominent among the alarmists was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made sure the whole world would understand his dumbed-down message by displaying a cartoon bomb before the United Nations General Assembly. It was only after the JCPOA closed all possible avenues to an Iranian nuclear weapon—and drained Netanyahu’s Looney Tunes bomb in the process—that we started hearing from the same forces more about how the JCPOA supposedly is bad because it doesn’t address other nefarious Iran-related activity. Activity such as drug-running by Hezbollah.

Imagine that everything Meyer's piece says or implies were true. Imagine that the Obama administration really did see a choice between getting the JCPOA and cracking down on Hezbollah's criminal activity. And imagine that the Obama administration said "yes" to everything that gung-ho team in DEA may have wanted to do. Then presumably the administration also would have to say, "Well, yes, we did have a chance to negotiate an agreement that would prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, but we thought a drug bust was more important." How would the alarmists, who had been ringing the alarm bell so long and hard about an Iranian nuclear weapon, react to that? We can be confident the reaction would not be to express compliments to Mr. Obama.

The gross inconsistency of those opposing the JCPOA reflects how their real objectives have little to do with the terms of the agreement or how it was negotiated. Their objectives have more to do with not wanting anyone to have any agreement with Iran on anything (Netanyahu's objective, while he portrays Iran as the sole source of everything bad in the Middle East), or about staying in step with American supporters of Netanyahu's government, or about not wanting any of Barack Obama's accomplishments to survive.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## Saudi Arabia's Mysterious Upheaval

Stung by an apparent defeat in Syria, Saudi Arabia's aggressive Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has arrested rivals within the kingdom's elite and provoked a political crisis in Lebanon, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Change is clearly afoot in Saudi Arabia – with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) engineering the dubious resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister and arresting some of the kingdom's richest businessmen and rivals within the royal family on charges of corruption – but exactly what it foretells is hard to read.

The Saudis also are reeling from the apparent defeat of Saudi-backed Sunni jihadists in Syria, including Al Qaeda and Islamic State militants. So what are the consequences for Saudi Arabia and its regional allies?

On Nov. 20, after Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri left Saudi Arabia and resurfaced in France, I spoke with Vijay Prashad, professor of International Studies at Trinity College in Connecticut. (Hariri has since returned to Lebanon where he remains prime minister at least for the time being.)

Prashad is the Chief Editor of LeftWord Books and the Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. He is the author of 20 books including *The Death of a Nation* and *The Future of the Arab Revolution*.

Dennis Bernstein: Where do you think the Prime Minister of Lebanon is now, and why is he there?

Vijay Prashad: Saad Hariri is currently in Paris. Emmanuel Macron went to Saudi Arabia and essentially rescued Saad Hariri from house arrest there. Hariri resigned on Saudi television. He was probably instructed to resign in order to create a political crisis in Lebanon. Hariri has indicated he may return to Beirut this week but there is no certainty that this is going to happen.

Dennis Bernstein: Do you think this is driven by the same forces behind the Crown Prince's arrest of key businessmen and political figures?

Vijay Prashad: It is important to point out that the crisis in Lebanon is both internally and externally generated. It is internally generated because Lebanon has a curious sectarian constitution where the various sects in the country—the Sunnis, the Shia, the Christians—have divided power.

One of the very important players in the divided government is Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is, of course, very close to the Iranian government and has been an adversary of Saad Hariri's and his father's Future Movement.

But the external pressure from Saudi Arabia is much more important. Since the defeat of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, Saudi Arabia has seen Iran stretch its wings in the region. It has tried various strategies to essentially put Iran back into its borders. The war in Syria was one such episode, as is the fight in Yemen and the attempt to strangle Qatar. Now, having failed in each of these attempts, Saudi Arabia is going after what is perhaps the most sensitive country in the region, which is Lebanon.

By forcing Mr. Hariri to resign and creating a political crisis inside Lebanon, the Saudis want to see a block form inside Lebanon that will try to push Hezbollah out of the political consensus. This is not going to happen, but it is raising tension in the region.

Dennis Bernstein: This is not a moderation in Saudi policy, as it is being portrayed in the Western press.



Vijay Prashad: It is important to recognize that the descendants of the founder of Saudi Arabia have basically shared power over the past ninety years. They have parceled out the institutions among the different lines and made sure that no single line dominated the entire kingdom. They have all exploited the oil and have been provided with a nuclear umbrella by the United States. That has been the basic order in Saudi Arabia. Because they were very helpful to the Americans in the anti-Communist crusade, they were allowed to export their brand of Islam across the Islamic world.

So this was the basic order until Mohammed bin Salman , the current Crown Prince, decided to consolidate power. He has arrested sections of his own family and tried to bring all power under this own control. It is a centralization of power that is taking place. His reason for doing this is actually very interesting.

For the past decade, Saudi Arabia has been running its oil wells at enormous capacity. It has been flooding international oil markets with oil, keeping prices down. Of course, this has not been good for Saudi Arabia, which has never diversified its economy. It has been facing a serious balance of payments shortfall.

Mohammad bin Salman has pushed a so-called "reform" agenda to liberalize the Saudi economy. He wants to have the Saudi oil company, Aramco, go on the public market. He has taken a stand against corruption, which he claims has cost the country hundreds of billions of dollars. He is going after the very rich in an attempt to recover some of these billions to help close the budget deficit inside Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, he has talked about the need to rein in extremism. But while he is saying all these things, he is prosecuting a decidedly anti-Iranian agenda, which is of course red meat to the extremists. It is not clear how he could, on the one hand, put the extremists in their place, while at the same time basically parroting the rhetoric of the extremists.

He might not only consolidate power from the rest of his family, he might consolidate power from some of the clerics and become the most extremist player in Saudi Arabia with his rhetoric against Iran. It is not a very comforting sight.

If this Saudi monarchy precipitately collapses, there will be serious chaos in Saudi Arabia. The entire institutional framework has been set up around the monarchy and there is no easily identifiable separate power base.

Dennis Bernstein: By the way, who is under arrest at the fancy hotel there in

Riyadh?

Vijay Prashad: One of the people under arrest was a former employer of mine. He is the richest man in Saudi Arabia and part-owner of Twitter. Another person under arrest is also one of the richest men in Saudi Arabia, who is heavily involved in Ethiopia. He is brokering the vast buy-up of Ethiopian land and gold mines by Saudi Arabia. These are the wealthiest people in the country. There are also about 200 businessmen of various means who are being held on charges of corruption.

It is interesting because, on the one hand, this is going to earn the Crown Prince some goodwill among the population, who are fed up with the crony corruption of the royal family. But this is not an entire shake-up of the system. After all, the Crown Prince and his circle will continue to feed at the trough of the oil profits of the kingdom.

Dennis Bernstein: As you point out, the timing is interesting.

Vijay Prashad: I was a little surprised that the corporate media didn't pick up on this. About a week before the arrests were made, there was a major investors' conference in Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince had asked a consultancy firm to write an important report titled "Saudi Vision 2020," where he laid out the plans to diversify the Saudi economy away from reliance on oil to make Saudi Arabia a kind of "Singapore in the Sand." To use the country's wealth to help it track into the future.

He has plans to build a vast new high-tech city in northern Saudi Arabia bordering Jordan and Egypt. At this conference, many banks and hedge funds appeared to be very excited to get involved in this project. Now, if you want to raise investor confidence, the last thing you should be doing is arresting some of the richest people in your country.

But I think this was a message the Crown Prince wanted to send to these investors, saying that he was not going to tolerate internal corruption. This is a kind of neoliberal message to the banks, that you won't have to worry about paying bribes, etc., this is going to be run in a modern way.

Dennis Bernstein: How do you see the US and Trump fitting into all of this?

Vijay Prashad: The US position is a little curious. Some have taken Jared Kushner's visit to Saudi Arabia as a green light given to conduct this kind of internal coup and perhaps also to push against Lebanon and Hezbollah. I'm sure there is some truth to that but, as I've said, this is a long-term policy of the Crown Prince to centralize power and put pressure on Iran.

This policy predates the Trump administration. Obama was quite happy with the idea of centralization of power in Saudi Arabia. Only recently has Congress begun speaking out against the war in Yemen. There is a long-term trend of the United States backing this Crown Prince, especially to push back against Iranian influence in the region.

Trump is far more aggressive in his anti-Iran position than Obama ever was and I think he has emboldened the Israelis. When the Crown Prince called Saad Hariri to Saudi Arabia he also summoned Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority. We don't know what was said in that meeting but since then the Saudi and the Israelis have been leaking stories saying that the two of them are meeting. At the same time, the United Arab Emirates has been making friendly gestures toward Israel.

Perhaps the Saudis are hallucinating that they will be able to use Israel and the Trump administration to do their dirty work vis-a-vis Iran. Perhaps it will begin with a war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. But Hezbollah, which was able to withstand the Israeli attack in 2006, is now much more battle-hardened as a result of its participation in Syria.

It is not likely that Hezbollah is going to crumble under Israeli fire. In fact, it might inflict considerable damage on Israel. Sensible politics at this point would lead one to say that there needs to be a serious conversation between these countries about dialing down the tension, but no one is really calling for that.

Dennis Bernstein: The situation with the Lebanese Prime Minister could become fairly explosive, couldn't it?

Vijay Prashad: Hezbollah is integrated fully into the Lebanese security apparatus. It is inconceivable that the Future Movement would actually like to set aside Hezbollah. And it is inconceivable that the Future Movement would welcome an Israeli attack on Hezbollah.

Lebanon is a very small country with 4 million to 5 million people. In 2006, when Israel bombed what was considered to be Hezbollah areas in Beirut, that bombing affected the whole city. I don't think the Future Movement are stupid enough to welcome an Israeli assault on their own society. They must realize that the entire Lebanese security structure is intertwined with Hezbollah's battlefield experience and its ability to defend the south of Lebanon.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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# Strange Twists in the Hariri Mystery

French President Macron has invited Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Paris, a possible opportunity to determine whether Hariri's sudden resignation, announced in Saudi Arabia, was coerced, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The strange case of Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his surprise resignation, delivered in Saudi Arabia, has developed international overtones with rumors about his possible kidnapping by the Saudis and France extending an invitation for him to come to Paris before possibly returning to Lebanon.

Because of concerns that his resignation may have been extracted by the Saudis under duress, the Lebanese government has refused to accept it unless he tenders it in person. In an interview last Sunday, Hariri looked harried and nervous. At one point the camera caught a man holding up some kind of sign behind the interviewer, as if he was trying to direct Hariri's comments.

I spoke again to Beirut-based political activist and environmentalist Rania Masri on Nov. 13 about the Hariri case. Masri is an Arab-American academic, an expert in the workings of the Lebanese government, and has been doing regular translations of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on Facebook.

Dennis Bernstein: Let's start with your response to the latest developments. The prime minister says he would like to return to Lebanon.

Rania Masri: Yesterday there was an interview conducted in Saudi Arabia. Saudi individuals were present during the interview. When you look at what Hariri actually said at this interview, it appears that the Saudi plan so far has not been successful. We have Hariri saying he wants to return to Lebanon, he is not sure when that will be, and that he will proceed with the resignation when he is here unless things change. So he left the door open for possibly not resigning.

As to why this is happening, you have to look at the events of the last two weeks. Saturday, [November 4], Saad Hariri read a statement that many of us believe was written by the Saudis. The Lebanese president and speaker of the house reject that statement of resignation because it was given while he was abroad. There is an almost total consensus that Hariri has been held captive since Friday.

During this time, it has become very apparent that Saudi Arabia has been in discussions with the US and Israeli governments and has been encouraging the Israeli government to attack Lebanon. The Lebanese president believes that he has gotten word that the Saudis and the Israelis are actually discussing something akin to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. We are not talking about a war such as what occurred in 2006 but the possibility of an invasion like the one that took place in 1982.

So the political rhetoric has been escalated by the Saudis. They have basically declared war on Lebanon. The Saudi plan was to threaten Lebanon with military destruction and hope that the Lebanese would rise up against Hezbollah, leading to a civil war. That plan has completely failed.

Dennis Bernstein: What has been Hezbollah's response to these extraordinary developments?

Rania Masri: [Secretary General of Hezbollah] Hassan Nasrallah gave two talks this week concerning the resignation and the need for national unity. In the second talk he spoke to the contents of the resignation letter and responded to these Saudi threats. Nasrallah believes that Saudi Arabia has asked Israel to attack Lebanon and is willing to support this effort with millions of dollars. We know from statements from the Saudi ministries that the Saudi government has declared war on all of Lebanon, not just Hezbollah.

Hezbollah condemns Saudi intervention in Lebanon. They consider it an insult that the Lebanese prime minister is being held against his will and they call for his return to Lebanon. If he wants to resign, he should do so from the presidential palace. Hezbollah considers the declared resignation to be unconstitutional, illegal and illegitimate, because it was not voluntary.

Nasrallah has continued to call for de-escalation. He points out that Saudi Arabia has seen all of its actions in the region fail—whether it be in Yemen, in Bahrain, in Syria, or in Iraq. Nasrallah believes that, as a result of this, Saudi Arabia is now venting its anger against Lebanon. He also points out that if Saudi Arabia really wants to, it can find ways to punish Hezbollah directly instead of attacking the entire country.

Dennis Bernstein: What role do you see the United States playing here?

Rania Masri: I have to say that I don't know what the US position is. The Saudis recognize that they have not achieved the level of support they would like. It is not really clear what the next step will be by the United States. What is clear is that the Israeli press is not enthusiastic about launching a war against Lebanon to fulfill Saudi aims.

Dennis Bernstein: Is all of this driven by what appears to be the profound failure of the Saudis in Syria?

Rania Masri: There are several issues at play. Historically, the Saudi government has always sought to create enemies, very much in the way the US government has. The de facto ruler in the country, Mohammed bin Salman, has proven himself to be a strategic failure. In Syria all they have managed to do is cause massive death and destruction through their support of ISIS and through their support for the destruction of Damascus and for regime change there.

We also know that there has been strong collaboration of Israel during the process. When we look at the military record of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, in Iraq, in Syria, we know that they are capable of great destruction. But they are not capable of transformation and change. I believe that this is an attempt on the part of the Saudis to vent their frustration and anger at numerous political failures and to achieve what has long been both a Saudi and Israeli goal, which is the destruction of the resistance movement in Lebanon.

Dennis Bernstein: I understand that the Saudi government has asked all of its citizens to leave Lebanon. What are your worst fears at this point?

Rania Masri: Yes, the Saudi and the Bahraini and the Kuwaiti governments have asked their citizens to leave the country. We know that they have directly intervened to force our prime minister to resign and to impose a new prime minister on Lebanon. This they have failed to do. They are also working to pressure the Gulf states and other countries to sanction Lebanon.

And there is open talk of a Saudi/Israeli attack on Lebanon. Personally, I don't think that is likely. There are other options. They could instigate terrorist acts in the country, as they did in Syria. But the stronger and more unified the country and the leadership is, the harder it will be for the Saudi government to cause disunity and civil tension.

Dennis Bernstein: Are people following all of this closely in Lebanon?

Rania Masri: We have gone through so many wars and attacks over the past twenty years that we suffer from a kind of fatigue. However, we have regular conversations among friends as to whether there will be another war and, if so, what it will look like. At the same time, many people in the country feel strengthened by the military prowess and the resolve of Hezbollah. Many feel that, if we did not have Hezbollah, the likelihood of an Israeli attack would be much higher.

It is really critical for people in the United States to understand that the Trump administration and the American Congress has continued to support this

apartheid regime in Israel which has consistently issued threats against Lebanon. The US government has continued to strengthen its relationship with the Saudi Arabian government despite the ongoing war crimes the Saudis have been committing in Yemen. Regardless of what happens in Lebanon, it is necessary for the US government to reevaluate its ties with the Saudi Arabian government or, at the very least, to stop the massive arm sales.

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## The Saudi Hand in Lebanon’s Crisis

Facing defeat in its proxy war for “regime change” in Syria, Saudi Arabia undertook some startling moves, including staging the resignation of Lebanon’s prime minister, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Last weekend during a visit to Saudi Arabia, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri suddenly and dramatically resigned, raising questions about whether the Saudi leadership was engineering a political crisis in Lebanon as a way to counter the defeat of its jihadist proxies in Syria.

Given the timing and the unusual circumstances – from a fancy hotel in Riyadh – questions also were raised about whether Hariri’s resignation amounted to the kidnapping of the Lebanese leader (who has dual Saudi citizenship) or whether it presaged a new front in the regional wars.

I spoke with Beirut-based Professor, Activist and Environmental Scientist Rania Masri last Monday, while Hariri’s whereabouts and safety were still in question.

Dennis Bernstein: The prime minister of Lebanon has stepped down. Could you talk a little bit about what provoked that and the significance of that action?

Rania Masri: The prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, was called very suddenly to Saudi Arabia. He cancelled all his appointments and went on Thursday. [On] Saturday there was a taped broadcast in which he stated that he was resigning as prime minister. This has never happened in the history of Lebanon. This is a resignation submitted from outside the country!

Secondly, the statement that he read was clearly not a statement that he wrote.

We know this because of linguistic assessments of the statement and we know this because his brother writes his statements and his brother has been in Lebanon. It is very clear that this was a resignation forced upon him by the Saudi government. He has not been answering his phone for the past few days.

Most likely he is locked up in the Ritz Carlton Hotel along with dozens of other influential Saudi princes and businessmen who are under arrest there. The president has asked him to return to Lebanon before the resignation becomes finalized.

Saad al-Hariri read the letter of resignation on Saturday. He said that he is forced to resign because of Iranian intervention in Lebanon. Imagine, to leave the country and go to Saudi Arabia to resign because of another country's intervention in your home country! He also claims in the statement that Hezbollah is an Iranian tool and that Iranian hands must be cut off by all means necessary. It was basically very threatening language against Lebanon.

Since then, Saudi minister Sabhan—who many believe wrote the statement for Hariri—has stated that Lebanon must decide between peace and keeping Hezbollah in the government. He continues to say that as long as Hezbollah is present in the Lebanese government, he will consider that the Lebanese government is at war with Saudi Arabia. So here we have a minister from Saudi Arabia openly declaring war on the entire country of Lebanon!

Dennis Bernstein: The simple explanation in the Western corporate press is that Hariri was afraid he would face the same fate as his father, who was assassinated.

Rania Masri: That has no basis in fact. There are three types of intelligence services in Lebanon, each of which is aligned to a different political party.

All have agreed that there is no evidence of any assassination plot against Hariri or anyone else in Lebanon. At the same time, no one has been able to reach him on the phone since Friday. He can't really believe that anyone is going to kill him if he answers the phone!

Dennis Bernstein: Should we be thinking about this in the context of this extraordinary shake-up in Saudi Arabia?

Rania Masri: One hundred percent. The day before Saad Hariri was called to Saudi Arabia, he was speaking positively of the Lebanese government. There was no discord within the government. Then he gets called to Saudi Arabia, disappears for a day and issues this resignation on a taped broadcast. At the same time, we have the capture and arrest of these very influential multi-millionaires in Saudi Arabia, all thrown into this same hotel.



We have to remember that Saad Hariri also has Saudi Arabian citizenship, that he and his family have had investments in Saudi Arabia since the early 1970's. He may be held liable to Saudi law, particularly if he loses his diplomatic immunity with his resignation. So at the very least we know that he did not issue his resignation because of an internal Lebanese problem. It is no coincidence that we now have this shake-up in Saudi Arabia to cement financial and military and political power all in one man.

Dennis Bernstein: This would be an extremely bold action on the part of the Saudis, one which almost certainly was not taken without the knowledge of the United States government. You have the US flooding Saudi Arabia with weapons so that they can tighten their grip in Yemen.

Rania Masri: Trump has been saluting the Saudi regime. After what has been happening the past few days, he actually tweeted that he would like Aramco to move its headquarters to New York and be part of the New York Stock Exchange, that this would serve US interests.

No, I don't think the Saudi regime began this shake-up without the US administration's blessing. Some have even taken it a step further and say that this is not a Saudi-imposed resignation but an Israeli-imposed resignation presented via the Saudis. There are several different analyses you can make, but what is clear is that our prime minister issued his resignation while out of the country and has not been available for communication ever since.

The Saudi regime has been escalating its war in Yemen without any political victory in sight, it was the main financier behind the ISIS terrorists in Syria with the specific purpose of destroying Damascus, and now has set its sights on Lebanon.

Dennis Bernstein: How do we find out at this point what is really going on?

Rania Masri: Given its record in the region, I don't think we should be calling in the United Nations. Remember that the United Nations Security Council imposed genocidal sanctions on Iraq for twelve years. In no way, as a person from this region, would I be reaching out to the UN.

What is needed is for Hariri to return to Lebanon and, if he wants to resign, he can do it from the safety of his home here. What is also needed is for the media, particularly in the West, to clearly recognize what is happening. These are not changes for democracy and against corruption in Saudi Arabia, as has been promoted by The Guardian, among others.

It's important to recognize that when Hezbollah is threatened, all Lebanon is threatened. Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization within the country,

Hezbollah is a legitimate political party, a legitimate resistance movement, it is part and parcel of the fabric of this country. What the Saudis are calling for is that the Lebanese relinquish what is left of our sovereignty and to sacrifice our main means of protecting ourselves against Israeli aggression.

Remember that it was Hezbollah that fought to liberate the south of Lebanon from the 22-year occupation of the Israelis. It was Hezbollah who defeated Israeli in the 2006 war. And because of that, since 2006, Israel has not launched another military aggression against this country, even though they typically do so every three years.

And for Saudi Arabia to threaten Lebanon that either we disarm and remove Hezbollah as a legitimate political party or we will face Saudi repercussions is basically having us choose between a war with Saudi Arabia or being defenseless and broken. Saudi Arabia has the means to cause assassinations, to launch terrorist campaigns, to wage economic warfare against the country, but they do not have the means to break the back of the Lebanese people.

Dennis Bernstein: You alluded to the invisible hand of Israel.

Rania Masri: Benjamin Netanyahu has been gleeful ever since the Saudi statements and he has been promoting it as a further reason for the international community to attack and isolate Iran and to dismantle Hezbollah. We already know that this Saudi regime and the Israeli regime are in cahoots. So it comes as no surprise for the Israeli government to be the first to welcome these Saudi statements.

The Saudis seem to have forgotten who the real enemy is in the region and to have accepted a false sectarian discourse that the enemy is Iran and the Shias. Well, we all know that the enemy of the region is Zionism, a philosophy built on apartheid that continues to seek expansionist means, that continues to promote ethnic cleansing and genocide against Palestinians.

Dennis Bernstein: What are you watching now, what are your concerns?

Rania Masri: People from various political spectrums in the country have been re-tweeting the statement of the Saudi Arabian Minister of State for Gulf Affairs and basically consider this a declaration of war. We are watching the news, we are following the situation very closely. We are making a lot of jokes about what is happening because that is how we deal with it. But we are also following the advice of Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, who has advised us to be calm and to wait a few days until we understand what has been happening. Nasrallah will speak again on Friday [Nov. 10] and respond to the specific content of the letter presented to us on Saturday.

Dennis Bernstein: How does Syria play into all of this?

Rania Masri: The way the Saudi government is behaving is like a cat in a corner. It is important to stress that the Saudi Arabian plan in Syria failed miserably. They were not able to destroy Damascus, they were not able to break the country apart, they were not able to dismantle the Syrian regime. They were able to contribute to the destruction and to the many massacres at the hands of ISIS.

We are dealing with a country with a great deal of financial and military power but whose plans in the region have failed. Now it is looking to completely destroy the resistance movement in Lebanon, particularly because Hezbollah also played a part in standing against ISIS in Syria.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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## How US Blunders Strengthened Iran

**Exclusive:** By echoing the Israeli-Saudi bellicosity toward Iran, President Trump is repeating the same mistakes of his predecessors and inviting wider Mideast wars that could enhance Iran’s position, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Behind only North Korea, Iran is the country the Trump administration vilifies most. The White House endorses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s injunction that “We must all stand together to stop Iran’s march of conquest, subjugation and terror.”

Parroting Netanyahu’s claim that Iran is “busy gobbling up the nations” of the Middle East, CIA Director and conservative GOP stalwart Mike Pompeo warned in June that Iran – which he branded “the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism” – now wields “enormous influence . . . that far outstrips where it was six or seven years ago.”

In an interview with MSNBC, Pompeo elaborated, “Whether it’s the influence they have over the government in Baghdad, whether it’s the increasing strength of Hezbollah and Lebanon, their work alongside the Houthis in Iran, (or) the Iraqi Shias that are fighting along now the border in Syria . . . Iran is everywhere

throughout the Middle East.”

Few would deny that Iran’s influence in the region has grown over the past decade. What’s missing from such dire warnings of its imperial designs, however, is any reflection on how aggressive policies by the United States and its allies have consistently backfired, creating needless chaos that Iran has exploited as a matter of self-interest and self-defense.

Consider the case of Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shiite organization that Israeli leaders describe as a major threat and almost certainly the target of Israel’s next war. Although the Iranian-backed force intervened actively in Syria to back the Assad government, it disclaims any intent to start a war with Israel.

It does, however, declare with great bravado its intent to deter another Israeli invasion of its homeland. “Israel should think a million times before waging any war with Lebanon,” said its leader earlier this year.

### **Spurred by Israeli Invasions**

In fact, Hezbollah owes its very existence to Israel’s repeated invasions of their country. In 1982, Israel broke a cease-fire with the Palestine Liberation Organization and invaded southern Lebanon with 60,000 troops. The Reagan administration took no steps to stop that invasion, which caused thousands of civilian casualties and turned much of the population against Israel.

With Iranian money and guidance, the Shiite resistance in Lebanon coalesced around the organization that became known as Hezbollah. “We are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation,” the group claimed in one of its ideological tracts. “We appealed to the world’s conscience, but heard nothing.”

Years later, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak conceded that “It was our presence [in Lebanon] that created Hezbollah.” Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin seconded that assessment, saying that Israel had let the “genie out of the bottle.”

In 2006, Israel again invaded Lebanon, this time to wipe out Hezbollah. Israel’s indiscriminate attacks against civilians drew condemnation from international human rights organizations. They also succeeded in strengthening the very enemy Israel sought to annihilate.

“Especially since the 2006 war with Israel, . . . an overwhelming majority of the Shi’a have embraced Hezbollah as the defender of their community,” writes Augustus Richard Norton in his study, *Hezbollah: A Short History*. “This suggests

that outsiders . . . seeking to reduce Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon must redress the security narrative rather than take steps that validate it."

Instead, of course, the United States and its Sunni Arab and Turkish allies promoted the violent overthrow of Syria's government, drawing Hezbollah forces into the fight for the survival of their longtime ally. While Hezbollah has paid a political and human price for its military expedition, its soldiers have gained tremendous battle experience, making them all the more formidable a foe.

### **The Iraqi Gift**

Washington's greatest geostrategic gift to Iran was the unprovoked U.S. overthrow of Iran's arch enemy, Saddam Hussein, in 2003. Iran had lost hundreds of thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars in an eight-year war with Iraq, triggered by Saddam's invasion in 1980. The Bush administration not only killed Saddam, but handed political power to Iraq's majority Shiite population, which looked to Iran for spiritual and political guidance.

That windfall may not have been entirely luck. The leading Iraqi lobbyist for war, the neoconservatives' darling Ahmed Chalabi, was later identified by U.S. authorities as a key Iranian intelligence asset. U.S. counterintelligence agents concluded that Chalabi and other Iraqi exiles, who peddled false claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, had "been used as agents of a foreign intelligence service ... to reach into and influence the highest levels of the U.S. government," in the words of a Senate Intelligence Committee report.

But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's office shut down the investigation, leaving Chalabi to direct the political purge of Iraq's government and then become Iraq's deputy prime minister and oil minister. The Chalabi-led purge targeted Iraq's Sunni politicians, aggravating the country's sectarian divide and fueling the insurgency that still plagues the country today. The violence strengthened Iran's hand in the country, as Shiite militia sought Tehran's help to defend their communities.

At the same time, popular opposition to the U.S. occupation led to the rise of radical Sunni terrorists. It was from their swelling ranks in Iraq's prisons that ISIS was born. ISIS made lightning gains across much of western Iraq in June 2014, with the conquest of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul, the country's second most populous city. With its very existence in jeopardy, Iraq's beleaguered government welcomed Iran's immediate dispatch of 2,000 soldiers to help block the ISIS offensive. Syria's air force also began striking ISIS bases in coordination with Baghdad.

### **Misguided Pressure**

Washington, in contrast, rejected Iraq's call for air strikes and suggested that its Shiite-led government should step down to placate aggrieved Sunnis. Only in August 2014 did President Obama authorize limited bombing of ISIS to protect minorities threatened by their military advance. Needless to say, many Iraqis were grateful to Iran for its military support at a critical time.

"The Iranians are playing a long game and a waiting game," said Sajad Jiyad, the director of the Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies in Baghdad. "They put their skins on the line. They lost three or four generals plus a dozen senior officers."

So when a "hamfisted" Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaking in Saudi Arabia, recently demanded that Baghdad send home Iranian-backed paramilitary units that helped defeat ISIS, it didn't go over well with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

"No party has the right to interfere in Iraqi matters," his office stated. Abadi called the Popular Mobilization forces "Iraqi patriots," not mere proxies of Iran, and insisted that they "should be encouraged because they will be the hope of country and the region." Score another few points for Tehran.

ISIS might never have spread into Syria had not the United States publicly promoted the overthrow of the Assad government in 2011, following years of covert efforts by Washington and Israel to weaken the regime and promote sectarian divisions within Syria.

Contributing greatly to the rise of radical Islamist forces in Syria was the U.S.-backed overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, which unleashed large stocks of arms and hundreds of hardened fighters to spread their revolution into Syria.

By late 2011, Sunni-led states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar began financing and arming militant Islamist rebels in Syria, including Al Qaeda and even ISIS. The resulting war killed hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians, uprooted millions of refugees, and laid waste to ancient cities.

The Obama administration proved itself just as deluded as the Bush administration about the efficacy of armed intervention. Describing hopes by the White House that Libya's uprising would "ripple out to other nations in the region" and fuel anti-regime movements in Syria and Iran, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Syria has served for 30 years as Iran's closest strategic ally in the region. U.S. officials believe the growing challenge to Mr. Assad's regime could motivate Iran's democratic forces."

Instead, of course, Syria's conflict prompted Iran's hardliners to send

Revolutionary Guard units and Hezbollah forces to the defense of their ally. With the help of Russian air power, they turned the tide in Assad's favor, leaving the Damascus regime intact and greatly in Tehran's debt.

### **The Yemeni Mess**

Echoing longstanding claims by Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration also insists that Iran is a major backer of Houthi tribal forces who swept down from northern Yemen to seize control of most of the country in early 2015. That March, with U.S. backing, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states launched a scorched-earth military campaign to oust the Houthis, in the name of resisting Iran.

The coalition's indiscriminate bombing of industrial and other civilian targets, including schools and hospitals, has laid waste to much of the country and destroyed the economy. Its blockade of ports caused mass hunger and triggered the world's worst cholera epidemic.

"Cynics can argue that the real strategy of the Saudi coalition is to rely on starvation and disease to wear down the Yemeni people," observed former White House adviser and CIA analyst Bruce Riedel. "The United Nations has labeled the war the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world . . . (Yet) Iran is the only winner, as it provides aid and expertise to the Houthis at a tiny fraction of the cost of the Saudi war effort while the Islamic Republic's Gulf enemies spend fortunes on a conflict they jumped into with no endgame or strategy."

Experts point out that Washington picked the wrong ally in this fight. "The Houthis are one of the few groups in the Middle East that has little intention or ability to confront the United States or Israel," writes Harvard lecturer Asher Orkaby. "And far from being aligned with extremists, the Houthi movement has repeatedly clashed with the Islamic State . . . and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is Saudi Arabia that has long supported Sunni Islamist groups in Yemen."

To compound the irony, the paranoid sheiks in Riyadh created the very threat they set out to crush with their invasion in 2015. Iranian ties to the Houthis were negligible before then. Remarking on years of attempts to smear them as pawns of Iran, the U.S. ambassador to Yemen reported in a classified cable in 2009, "The fact that . . . there is still no compelling evidence of that link must force us to view this claim with some skepticism."

Two former members of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning have recently confirmed that "the vast majority of the Houthi arsenal . . . was seized from Yemeni army stockpiles," not provided by Iran.

As the devastating war grinds on, however, Iran has provided the Houthis with modest training, advice, and ground munitions. “Iran has exploited, on the cheap, the Saudi-led campaign, and thus made the expansion of Iranian influence in Yemen a Saudi self-fulfilling prophecy,” they observe.

“By catering to the Saudis in Yemen,” they add, “the United States has . . . strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security, brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse, and visited more death, destruction, and displacement on the Yemeni population.”

### **Qatar and Beyond**

In a moment of particular lunacy, President Trump this June tweeted his support for a Saudi-led political and economic blockade of Qatar, a tiny but gas-rich Gulf emirate. Riyadh is aggrieved in part by Qatar’s sponsorship of Al Jazeera, the politically nettlesome broadcaster. Trump’s action surprised and embarrassed the Pentagon, which operates a huge military base in Qatar.

Iran quickly took advantage of this latest Saudi blunder. It opened its airspace to Qatari flights that were barred from crossing the Arabian Peninsula. It shipped food to replace supplies lost by the closure of the Saudi-Qatari border. In gratitude, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Tehran after recalling its ambassador two years ago.

“This dispute has pushed Qatar towards other players in the region who are critical: Iran, Turkey, Russia, China,” said Rob Richer, former Associate Deputy Director for Operations at the CIA. “These are players who now have a lot more influence as we diminish our influence in the region. In this way, the blockade has actually undermined everything that the Saudis and Emiratis wanted by pushing the Qataris into the arms of these other regional players.”

Time after time, in other words, the United States and its regional supporters have made a mess of matters with their overt and covert military interventions in the Middle East. It’s only natural that Iran, having long been targeted by Washington and its allies (sometimes for understandable reasons), tries to seize opportunities to defend its interests.

The lesson we should learn is that curbing Iran and promoting U.S. security interests will require less intervention from afar, not more self-defeating forays into the region.

As Chatham House research fellow Renad Mansour recently observed, until the United States overcomes its counterproductive reactions to obsessive fears of Iranian influence, “the Iranophobes will be right about one thing: Iran is the smarter player in the region.”



Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books related to national security and international relations, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Trade* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

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