

# US Confusion over the Syrian War

Official Washington is in a tizzy over Russia's decision to join the fight in Syria to defeat Al Qaeda and ISIS, though one might have thought the U.S. would welcome Moscow's help. But there are other factors, including the wishes of Israel and Saudi Arabia, complicating matters, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On May 1, I wrote an analysis on "Changing Alliances and the National Interest in the Middle East." In this piece, I made the argument that, at least since September 2001 and the declaration of the "war on terror," the defeat of Al Qaeda and its affiliates has been a publicly stated national interest of the United States. This certainly has been the way it has been presented by almost continuous government pronouncements and media stories dedicated to this "war" over the years.

Given this goal, it logically follows that, with the evolution of Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (aka ISIS or Daesh) and Jabhat al Nusra (aka Al Qaeda in Syria), those who also seek the destruction of such groups are America's de facto allies in the "war on terror" and warrant our assistance. Likewise, those who openly or clandestinely support these religious fanatics are opponents of a central U.S. national interest, and their relationship with the United States should at least be open to review.

Then came the shocker: Who has been and continues to actively oppose these al-Qaeda derivatives with soldiers on the ground? It turns out to be, among others – Iran, Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government. And, who are clandestinely aiding the Al-Qaeda affiliates, the enemies of Washington? It turns out to be Israel and Saudi Arabia.

As I explain in my original analysis, this latter development has much to do with the fact that both the Israelis and the Saudis have decided that regime change in Syria is a high priority, even if it means ISIS and al-Nusra end up taking over Syria and, as Robert Parry puts it in a Consortiumnews.com article, ISIS "chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other 'heretics' and/or Al Qaeda having a major Mideast capital from which to plot more attacks on the West."

Has the U.S. government, or for that matter the U.S. media, brought this anomalous situation to the attention of the general public? No. Has Washington altered its policies in the region so as to ally with the actual anti-al-Qaeda forces? Not at all. Why not? These are questions we will address below, but first we must look at a recent complicating factor.

## Russia to the Rescue

This screwball situation has now taken yet another turn. The Russian government, which also sees Al Qaeda and its affiliates as a growing threat, has decided that the U.S. will not meaningfully act against the religious fanatics now threatening Syria – a country with which it, Russia, has strong ties. Having come to this conclusion, Moscow has decided to take the initiative and increase its military assistance to Damascus.

According to a *New York Times* article of Sept. 5, this includes bringing into Syria as many as a thousand military advisers and support staff. Russia already has a naval base at the port city of Tartus. Now it is establishing a presence at the main airbase outside the city of Latakia.

All of this has raised alarms in Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry, who has met several times with Russian officials about the Syrian civil war, was reported by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on Sept. 10 to have called his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to tell him that the Russian moves will only increase the level of violence rather than help promote a negotiated settlement.

If this report is accurate, Kerry must have come across as rather lame. After over four years of protracted internecine slaughter, over 4 million refugees, and numerous failed attempts at a negotiated a settlement, all one has as a result is the growth of rampaging religious fanatics who now control much of Syria and part of Iraq as well.

It might just be the case that Moscow has come to the conclusion that a negotiated settlement is not possible, and what one really needs is a military victory that destroys organizations such as ISIS and al-Nusra. Oddly, the U.S. government seems to be alarmed at this prospect. No doubt this is because Moscow sees no reason to displace its ally, Bashar al-Assad, while “regime change” is a cause celebre for U.S. and Israeli leaders.

Washington has gone so far as to request NATO-affiliated countries to deny Russian transport planes permission to overfly their territory on their way to Syria. At least one such country, Bulgaria, has done just that. Fortunately, this does not really hamper the Russian effort. Iran, another enemy of Al Qaeda, has granted permission for the over-flights, thus opening up a convenient and more or less direct route for the Russian supply line.

The goal of destroying Al-Qaeda-like organizations is, supposedly, what the “war on terror” is all about. Nonetheless, the U.S. government’s policies in this regard are inconsistent. Does the U.S. want to destroy Al Qaeda and its

affiliates or not? The answer is, mostly, yes. However, something often holds the government back – something that the Russians don't have to contend with.

That something breaks down into three parts: (1) longstanding, conservative Washington-based special interest lobbies, the most powerful of which is sponsored by Israel; (2) the pro-war neoconservative elements within American society that often cooperate with these lobbies; and (3) an American military bureaucracy parts of which are committed to maintaining a system of land, air and naval bases situated mostly in dictatorial Middle East states hostile to both Russia and Syria. It is this combination of forces that prevents meaningful changes even as evolving realities would seem to demand them.

In other words, while Israel and Saudi Arabia can act in ways they consider to be in their national interests, their agents and allies in Washington exercise enough influence to discourage U.S. policymakers from doing the same thing when it comes to the Middle East. That is why Washington is not pointing up the fact that two close "allies" are helping the same sort of people who attacked the World Trade Center, while simultaneously chastising the Russians for actually acting forcefully against those same terrorists.

The inability to adjust to changing realities is a sure sign of decline, particularly for a "great power." And, unfortunately that seems to be the situation for the U.S. At least at this point, one can only conclude that the Obama administration's ability to secure the Iran nuclear agreement is an isolated example of realism.

Current U.S. policy toward Syria shows that Washington has not made the turnaround leading to a permanent clear-sighted ability to assess national interests in the Middle East.

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## Who's to Blame for Syria Mess? Putin!

**Exclusive:** Official Washington's new "group think" is to blame Russia's President Putin for the Syrian crisis, although it was the neocons and President George W. Bush who started the current Mideast mess by invading Iraq, the Saudis who funded Al Qaeda, and the Israelis who plotted "regime change," says

Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Sen. Lindsey Graham may have been wrong about pretty much everything related to the Middle East, but at least he has the honesty to tell Americans that the current trajectory of the wars in Syria and Iraq will require a U.S. re-invasion of the region and an open-ended military occupation of Syria, draining American wealth, killing countless Syrians and Iraqis, and dooming thousands, if not tens of thousands, of U.S. troops.

Graham's grim prognostication of endless war may be a factor in his poll numbers below one percent, a sign that even tough-talking Republicans aren't eager to relive the disastrous Iraq War. Regarding the mess in Syria, there are, of course, other options, such as cooperation with Russia and Iran to resist the gains of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and a negotiated power-sharing arrangement in Damascus. But those practical ideas are still being ruled out.

Official Washington's "group think" still holds that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "must go," that U.S. diplomats should simply deliver a "regime change" ultimatum not engage in serious compromise, and that the U.S. government must obstruct assistance from Russia and Iran even if doing so risks collapsing Assad's secular regime and opening the door to an Al Qaeda/Islamic State victory.

Of course, if that victory happens, there will be lots of finger-pointing splitting the blame between President Barack Obama for not being "tough" enough and Russia's President Vladimir Putin who has become something of a blame-magnet for every geopolitical problem. On Friday, during a talk at Fort Meade in Maryland, Obama got out front on assigning fault to Putin.

Obama blamed Putin for not joining in imposing the U.S.-desired "regime change" on Syria. But Obama's "Assad must go!" prescription carries its own risks as should be obvious from the U.S. experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Ukraine. Ousting some designated "bad guy" doesn't necessarily lead to some "good guy" taking over.

More often, "regime change" produces bloody chaos in the target country with extremists filling the vacuum. The idea that these transitions can be handled with precision is an arrogant fiction that may be popular during conferences at Washington's think tanks, but the scheming doesn't work out so well on the ground.

And, in building the case against Assad, there's been an element of "strategic communications" the new catch phrase for the U.S. government's mix of

psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. The point is to use and misuse information to manage the perceptions of the American people and the world's public to advance Washington's strategic goals.

So, although it's surely true that Syrian security forces struck back fiercely at times in the brutal civil war, some of that reporting has been exaggerated, such as the now-discredited claims that Assad's forces launched a sarin gas attack against Damascus suburbs on Aug. 21, 2013. The evidence now suggests that Islamic extremists carried out a "false flag" operation with the goal of tricking Obama into bombing the Syrian military, a deception that almost worked. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

Even earlier, independent examinations of how the Syrian crisis developed in 2011 reveal that Sunni extremists were part of the opposition mix from the start, killing Syrian police and soldiers. That violence, in turn, provoked government retaliation that further divided Syria and exploited resentments of the Sunni majority, which has long felt marginalized in a country where Alawites, Shiites, Christians and secularists are better represented in the Assad regime. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War.](#)"]

### **An Obvious Solution**

The obvious solution would be a power-sharing arrangement that gives Sunnis more of a say but doesn't immediately require Assad, who is viewed as the protector of the minorities, to step down as a precondition. If Obama opted for that approach, many of Assad's Sunni political opponents on the U.S. payroll could be told to accept such an arrangement or lose their funding. Many if not all would fall in line. But that requires Obama abandoning his "Assad must go!" mantra.

So, while Official Washington continues to talk tough against Assad and Putin, the military situation in Syria continues to deteriorate with the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front, gaining ground, aided by financial and military support from U.S. regional "allies," including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-led Persian Gulf states. Israel also has provided help to the Nusra Front, caring for its wounded troops along the Golan Heights and bombing pro-government forces inside Syria.

President Obama may feel that his negotiations with Iran to constrain its nuclear program when Israeli leaders and American neocons favored a bomb-bomb-bombing campaign have put him in a political bind where he must placate Israel and Saudi Arabia, including support for Israeli-Saudi desired "regime change" in Syria and tolerance of the Saudi-led invasion of Yemen. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[On Syria, Incoherence Squared.](#)"]

Privately, I'm told, Obama agreed to – and may have even encouraged – Putin's increased support for the Assad regime, realizing it's the only real hope of averting a Sunni-extremist victory. But publicly Obama senses that he can't endorse this rational move. Thus, Obama, who has become practiced at speaking out of multiple sides of his mouth, joined in bashing Russia sharing that stage with the usual suspects, including The New York Times' editorial page.

In a lead editorial on Saturday, entitled "Russia's Risky Military Moves in Syria," the Times excoriated Russia and Putin for trying to save Assad's government. Though Assad won a multi-party election in the portions of Syria where balloting was possible in 2014, the Times deems him a "ruthless dictator" and seems to relish the fact that his "hold on his country is weakening."

The Times then reprises the "group think" blaming the Syrian crisis on Putin. "Russia has long been a major enabler of Mr. Assad, protecting him from criticism and sanctions at the United Nations Security Council and providing weapons for his army," the Times asserts. "But the latest assistance may be expanding Russian involvement in the conflict to a new and more dangerous level."

Citing the reported arrival of a Russian military advance team, the Times wrote: "The Americans say Russia's intentions are unclear. But they are so concerned that Secretary of State John Kerry called the foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, twice this month and warned of a possible 'confrontation' with the United States, if the buildup led to Russian offensive operations in support of Mr. Assad's forces that might hit American trainers or allies.

"The United States is carrying out airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State, which is trying to establish a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, as well as struggling to train and arm moderate opposition groups that could secure territory taken from the extremists."

### **Double Standards, Squared**

In other words, in the bizarre world of elite American opinion, Russia is engaging in "dangerous" acts when it assists an internationally recognized government fighting a terrorist menace, but it is entirely okay for the United States to engage in unilateral military actions inside Syrian territory without the government's approval.

Amid this umbrage over Russia helping the Syrian government, it also might be noted that the U.S. government routinely provides military assistance to regimes all over the world, including military advisers to the embattled U.S.-created regime in Iraq and sophisticated weapons to nations that carry out attacks

beyond their own borders, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Clearly, the Times believes that what is good for the U.S. goose is not tolerable for the Russian gander. Indeed, if Russia's assistance to the Syrian government leads to a "confrontation" with U.S. forces or allies, it is Russia that is held to blame though its forces are there with the Syrian government's permission while the U.S. forces and allies aren't.

The Times also defends the bizarre effort by the U.S. State Department last week to organize an aerial blockade to prevent Russia from resupplying the Syrian army. The Times states:

"The United States has asked countries on the flight path between Russia and Syria to close their airspace to Russian flights, unless Moscow can prove they aren't being used to militarily resupply the Assad regime. Bulgaria has done so, but Greece, another NATO ally, and Iraq, which is depending on America to save it from the Islamic State, so far have not. World leaders should use the United Nations General Assembly meeting this month to make clear the dangers a Russian buildup would pose for efforts to end the fighting."

Given the tragic record of The New York Times and other mainstream U.S. media outlets promoting disastrous "regime change" schemes, including President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and President Obama's bombing campaign in Libya in 2011, you might think the editors would realize that the best-laid plans of America's armchair warriors quite often go awry.

And, in this case, the calculation that removing Assad and installing some Washington-think-tank-approved political operative will somehow solve Syria's problems might very well end up in the collapse of the largely secular government in Damascus and the bloody arrival of the Islamic State head-choppers and/or Al Qaeda's band of terrorism plotters.

With the black flag of Islamic terrorism flying over the ancient city of Damascus, Sen. Graham's grim prognostication of a U.S. military invasion of Syria followed by an open-ended U.S. occupation may prove prophetic, as the United States enters its final transformation from a citizens' republic into an authoritarian imperial state.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click](#)**

here.

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## On Syria, Incoherence Squared

**Exclusive:** In the up-is-down world of Official Washington, everyone condemns Russia for aiding Syria's internationally recognized government but stays mum on Saudi Arabia and other U.S. "allies" arming Al Qaeda and various terrorists fighting the Syrian government, an incoherence examined by Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Centuries ago, an Andalusian philosopher known as Ibn Rushd wrote a treatise called *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, or "The Incoherence of the Incoherence." He was taking aim at an old rival named Al-Ghazzali, but were he alive today, Averroes, as he was known to the Europeans, might very well have been talking about U.S. policy in Syria instead.

Never very sensible to begin with, Washington's foreign-policy gurus have been piling confusion upon confusion in response to charges that Russia is stepping up military aid for Bashar al-Assad's besieged government in Damascus.

The words began flying over the Labor Day weekend when the Obama administration announced that Moscow was jetting in soldiers and advisers to an airfield south of Latakia on Syria's Mediterranean coast. It was setting up prefab housing for as many as a thousand personnel and installing a portable air traffic control station, the administration said, while Reuters added a few days later that Russia had sent two tank landing ships as well.

In short order, Secretary of State John Kerry was on the phone to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warning him that intervention "could further escalate the conflict, lead to greater loss of innocent life, increase refugee flows and risk confrontation with the anti-ISIL Coalition operating in Syria."

All the usual suspects then piled on. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg voiced concern over the alleged escalation, as did Israel, while NATO member Bulgaria quickly bowed to U.S. pressure to bar Russian aircraft from its airspace.

*The New York Times'* Neil MacFarquhar sounded positively mournful in noting that Russia had blown yet another opportunity "to show that it could be a useful international partner and should not be subject to international sanctions over



its role in the Ukraine conflict," while fellow *Times* reporter Michael R. Gordon notorious as co-author with the disgraced Judith Miller of a cooked-up 2002 article alleging that Saddam Hussein was seeking nuclear weapons reminded readers that Russian denials were to be discounted from the start.

"Providing a benign explanation for the operations," Gordon wrote, "the Russian news media has [sic] suggested that the planes were carrying humanitarian assistance. That is the same rationale Russia used to explain convoys that are believed to have delivered military supplies to Ukrainian separatists and that Iran has used to fly arms to Damascus to support the Assad government."

Evidence was lacking, yet the verdict was in. At first glance, U.S. pique seemed difficult to understand. Since America has struggled to come up with allies willing to flout international law by bombing ISIS positions inside Syria without Syrian government permission, one would think that it would be grateful if Russia was indeed sending military equipment for the purpose of fighting the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Since ISIS and its sometime allies Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are continuing to advance, Washington obviously needs help, so why turn up its nose at Russian aid?

But one would be wrong. The problem is not only that the Obama administration is at war with ISIS, but that it is at war at the same time with Islamic State's archenemy, the Baathist government in Damascus. Therefore, it does not want help from anyone who does not feel the same.

Since Russia argues that Assad should be supported since he is the main force fighting ISIS at the moment, Russian presence is unwanted. Unless it agrees to oppose Assad and ISIS equally, it should take its military equipment and go.

But this approach has led to widespread confusion on a number of points, among them how to wage war against two armies that are simultaneously at one another's throat. How to attack one without benefitting the other is a conundrum that even the White House can't figure out.

According to the *Times*, for instance, U.S. policy is to bomb ISIS at every opportunity except when it is engaged in combat with Syrian government troops, in which case its policy is to hold off so as "to avoid the perception of aiding a leader whose ouster President Obama has called for." But this has led to suspicion that Washington's hostility to ISIS is at best qualified since it is happy to use it as a proxy against Assad.

The *Times* also reports that American-trained fighters inserted into Syria in late July were under strict instructions not to attack Assad but, rather, to go after ISIS alone. But this has led to charges that Washington is uninterested in

defeating Assad because its real target is ISIS.

### **The Real Enemy?**

So who's the real enemy ISIS, Assad, both, or neither? No one is sure, which is why non-Al Qaeda rebel groups were unwilling to come to the aid of U.S.-trained forces when they came under attack by Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate, in northern Syria on July 31.

Since the American-trained forces were only interested in attacking ISIS and not the Baathists, according to the *Times*, the other groups figured that their real purpose was to sow dissension within rebel ranks. So they held off while Al Nusra neatly rounded up the pro-U.S. fighters, killing some and capturing others.

Other observers are also unsure. Liberal interventionists like *Times* columnist Roger Cohen, a supporter of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and now a supporter of intervention in Syria, can't understand why Assad is still in power, while the Saudis are losing patience, too. Where the U.S. had promised an easy win, the result is a disaster that is spreading far beyond the bounds of the Middle East.

Syria is in ruins with more than 200,000 people killed according to UN estimates, 7.6 million displaced, and another 3.3 million turned refugees. But the human tidal wave generated by U.S. intervention not only in Syria but in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan is now washing up in Europe, playing into the hands of the neo-fascist right and adding to a nationalist uproar that has been growing since the 2008 financial crisis and the civil war in the Ukraine.

Yet if reports are correct that ISIS is at the point of severing a vital north-south highway known as "the spinal column of the regime," the problem may be getting even worse. Such a setback could leave millions of people stranded in ISIS territory and generate another surge of refugees that could conceivably spell the end of the European Union. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Madness of Blockading Syria's Regime,"]

It's a four-way head-on collision that "brilliant" foreign-policy experts have spent years devising. Two things as a result now seem clear. One is that the fuss over Russian military shipments looks even phonier than the manufactured crisis back in 2002 over aluminum tubes, yellow-cake uranium, and other ingredients that Saddam Hussein was supposedly seeking to build an atom bomb.

A few days after the Obama administration went public with the latest allegations, the Russian foreign ministry seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Russian military specialists help Syrians master Russian hardware, and we can't

understand the anti-Russian hysteria about this,” Maria V. Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry’s spokeswoman, explained. “We have been supplying Syria with arms and military equipment for a long time. We are doing this in accordance with existing contracts and in full accordance with international law.”

Since Russia maintains that the shipments are both legal and routine, it is up to the United States to prove otherwise. Yet it has made no effort to do so, and neither has the press tried to hold it to account. (Under international law, it is not illegal to provide military assistance and advisers to a sovereign government, something the United States and other nations do routinely, such as currently in Iraq.)

The other thing that seems clear is that the confusion is entirely self-generated. Although the Obama administration claims to oppose ISIS and other Al Qaeda-type forces, it has spent years playing both sides of the fence.

In August 2012, a widely circulated report by the Defense Intelligence Agency noted that Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafists were the driving forces behind the anti-Assad revolt, that they were seeking to establish a “Salafist principality” in eastern Syria as part of a general anti-Shi’ite jihad, and that their backers in the West, the Gulf states, and Turkey were all comfortable with such an outcome.

Last October, Vice President Joe Biden let slip at a talk at Harvard’s Kennedy School that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world” that eventually morphed into ISIS and yet the U.S. did not object, at least not publicly.

Similarly, the White House kept mum last spring when U.S.-made TOW missiles, most likely supplied by the Saudis, enabled Al Nusra to mount a successful offensive in Syria’s northern Idlib province. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Climbing into Bed With Al Qaeda.”]

And prior to the debacle in northern Syria when U.S.-trained forces came under Al Qaeda attack, the U.S. disclosed that it had also reached out to Al Nusra to make sure that it did not object. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “How US Allies Aid Al Qaeda in Syria.”]

Indeed, when Al Nusra attacked the pro-U.S. unit instead, the group, known as Division 30, issued a statement calling on “the brothers in the Nusra Front” to

“stop the bloodshed and preserve the unity.” If U.S.-backed forces regard Al Nusra as brothers, is it any surprise that people suspect that America’s hostility toward ISIS is less than total?

## **Deep Incoherence**

It’s the incoherence of the incoherence, as Ibn Rushd might say. So how did the U.S. arrive at such an amazing impasse? Theories abound that Obama is by nature a ditherer; that he is embroiled in a clash between neocon hawks and more sensible foreign-policy “realists”; that he is unable to back down after committing himself to Assad’s overthrow during the so-called Arab Spring, and so forth.

But the best way to understand it is as unexpected blowback from the nuclear accord with Iran. Although liberals are counting on the agreement to defuse tensions in the Middle East, it is in fact doing the opposite. As the administration moves to assure its allies that it is not abandoning them, it is stepping up military aid and agreeing to their most extreme demands.

In mid-July, Obama offered to hold “intensive discussions” with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concerning how to bolster Israeli defenses while at the same time promising to increase military aid to Saudi Arabia and other super-rich members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Just as the administration feels it has no choice but to offer Saudi Arabia military assistance in its growing assault on Yemen, it feels equally bound to go along with the kingdom’s increased support for Al Nusra in Syria.

Indeed, when Obama telephoned King Salman in early April, he made no mention of the successful advance that Al Qaeda had mounted in Idlib just a few days earlier thanks to Saudi largess. Instead, he steered the conversation around to a more congenial topic, i.e. Iran’s “destabilizing activities in the region.”

The U.S. bombs Al Qaeda and then fails to object when its allies supply it with U.S.-made high-tech weaponry. But what are a few optically-guided TOW missiles among friends?

Unlike the U.S., Saudi Arabia is crystal clear about priorities in Syria. They are to topple Assad rather than battle ISIS and it is little short of paranoid concerning Russian or Iranian efforts aimed at thwarting such designs.

Conceivably, Obama could have reversed course and admitted that the Russians are of course right and that supporting Assad is preferable to the nightmare of seeing a black ISIS banner fluttering from the glorious Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. But that would have meant pulling the rug out from under Riyadh, America’s oldest ally in the Middle East, with unknown consequences for the

future of the fragile Saudi monarchy.

It would have meant further alienating Israel, frightening even liberal supporters of the administration in the U.S., and entering into a tacit alliance with Iran, which also backs Assad and whose supreme leader on Thursday reiterated his call for destruction of the Jewish state. It also would have meant joining forces with Russia despite the deepening impasse over Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The results would have made Nixon's trip to China seem like a minor policy adjustment. For Obama, it would be a bridge too far, which is why Obama finds it easier to just say yes to Saudi Arabia's destruction of Yemen and the ongoing rape of Syria despite the horrendous human costs. The U.S. has the wolf by the ears and can't let go. The results are likely to be interesting.

**Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).**

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## Neocons Blame Obama for Syria

**Exclusive:** Neocons are so obsessed with their dream of Syrian "regime change" that they are castigating President Obama for not sharing their hallucination of nearly invisible "moderates" taking power when the near-certain result would be a victory for Sunni terrorists, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Barack Obama has an unfortunate genius for picking advisers who oppose his better instincts. Recall his choice of General Stanley McChrystal, who was openly contemptuous of the President and other civilian leaders, to head operations in Afghanistan; and his appointment of the hawkish Victoria Nuland, one of Dick Cheney's top foreign policy advisers, to oversee policy in Eastern Europe. She systematically sabotaged U.S.-Russia relations over the issue of Ukraine, just when the United States needed Moscow's cooperation on a range of vital issues from Afghanistan to Iran to Syria.

Add now to the long list of examples Frederic Hof, who was appointed by Obama in 2012 as "special adviser for transition in Syria" with the rank of ambassador. He's currently a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, named after a corrupt business tycoon and former Saudi adviser who became prime minister of Lebanon in the mid-1990s (and died in a still-unsolved bombing in Beirut in 2005).

Hof is today busy churning out emotional articles blaming Obama for “a humanitarian abomination and policy catastrophe” in Syria. Blasting the administration for “leav[ing] millions of Syrians subject to barrel bombs, starvation sieges, mass terrorism, and collective punishment so as not to offend Iran,” he lays the horrendous Syrian refugee crisis, “pictures of dead children” and all, directly at Obama’s door.

The source of the administration’s fecklessness, he asserts, is Obama’s single-minded “courtship” of Iran to achieve a dubious nuclear deal at the expense of “fully enabling the mass homicide strategy of its Syrian client.” He adds, “Iranian policies in Syria and Iraq have made vast swaths of both countries safe for jihadis,” a remarkable conclusion that must please the Atlantic Council’s Saudi government funders.

You would never know from his writing that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are the main backers of radical Islamists in Syria and indeed throughout the world. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton observed in a 2009 cable, “Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”

Hof, like other neo-conservatives, insists that “removing Assad” must be “the first step” in a fundamental reorientation of U.S. policy toward Syria. He maintains that grassroots democracy would then flourish thanks to “hundreds of local councils” and “a vast network of civil society organizations, the kinds of voluntary professional associations that undergird Western democracies.”

You really have to wonder what planet he’s on. Weren’t we similarly promised that regime change would usher in pluralistic democracy in Iraq and Libya? Does anyone besides Hof really believe that pro-Western liberals would step into the vacuum to replace Assad? Just how are these local council members supposed to take on heavily armed and battle-hardened terrorists from ISIS and other Islamist militia who gain ground in Syria nearly every day?

President Obama last year ridiculed as “fantasy” the “idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah.”

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Hof’s Atlantic Council in 2014 that removing Assad would leave Syria “consumed with terror, chaos and starvation”, and that was before the recent military gains by ISIS.

Another expert who disputes Hof's rosy view of Assad's opposition is Aron Lund, a Syria analyst with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "You are not going to find this neat, clean, secular rebel group that respects human rights and that is waiting and ready because they don't exist," he told the New York Times last year.

Consider the recent fate of some 54 U.S.-trained "moderate" Syrian rebels, graduates of a \$500 million CIA program to foster a non-Islamist alternative to Assad. The hapless rebels were grabbed by the Nusra Front, a Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda, as soon as they entered Syria this July possibly with connivance from Turkish intelligence, which has long supported Islamist forces in Syria.

In December 2014, the secular Syrian Revolutionaries Front, with an estimated 7,000 fighters, was wiped out by the Nusra Front, with Turkish and Saudi support. Other U.S.-backed "moderates" with the Free Syrian Army have simply defected to ISIS or the Nusra Front, handing over millions of dollars worth of U.S. weapons in the bargain.

Earlier this year, Robert Ford, former U.S. ambassador to Syria, disavowed his longstanding support for providing weapons to the rebels. "The people we have backed have not been strong enough to hold their ground against the Nusra Front," he admitted. "It becomes impossible to field an effective opposition when no one even agrees who or what is the enemy."

The Obama administration began promoting "regime change" as early as the spring of 2011, when the protest movement against Assad was only weeks old. The reason had nothing to do with human rights: "the White House has concluded that it has much less to lose than the Iranians do if Mr. Assad is swept away," according to David Sanger of the New York Times.

From the beginning, as I showed in a previous story, the opposition to Assad turned violent with a strong Islamist presence. By the summer of 2012, a Defense Intelligence Agency report stated flatly that "the Salafist (sic), the Muslim Brotherhood, and (al-Qaeda) are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria," a finding independently confirmed by Reuters. The New York Times reported the same year that "Most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists."

Three years ago, in other words, it was already clear that the fall of the Assad regime would lead either to worse violence or to the victory of radical Islamists. Somehow, Ambassador Hof, Obama's "special adviser for transition in Syria," never got the memo, or maybe, like many neoconservative ideologues, he just didn't want to believe the facts.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "[Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions](#)"; "[Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran](#)"; "[Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor](#)"; "[The Saudis' Hurt Feelings](#)"; "[Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster](#)"; "[The US Hand in the Syrian Mess](#)"; and "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War.](#)" ]

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## Madness of Blockading Syria's Regime

**Exclusive:** The U.S. State Department is trying to block Russian supplies going to Syria's embattled government despite the risk that collapsing the regime would create a vacuum filled by the Islamic State or Al Qaeda, another nightmare dreamt up by the neocons and liberal hawks, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Does the U.S. government want the Islamic State and/or its fellow-travelers in Al Qaeda to take over Syria? As far as the State Department is concerned, that seems to be a risk worth taking as it moves to cut off Russia's supply pipeline to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad – even as Sunni terrorist groups expand their grip on Syrian territory.

It appears that hardliners within the Obama administration have placed the neocon goal of "regime change" in Syria ahead of the extraordinary dangers that could come from the black flag of Sunni terrorism raised over the capital of Damascus. That would likely be accompanied by the Islamic State chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other "heretics" and/or Al Qaeda having a major Mideast capital from which to plot more attacks on the West.

And, as destabilizing as [the current flow](#) of Middle East refugees is to Europe, a victory by the Islamic State or Al Qaeda's Nusra Front would open the flood gates, sending millions of desperate people pouring out of Syria and creating a political as well as humanitarian crisis. At that point, there also would be enormous pressure on President Barack Obama or his successor to mount a full-scale invasion of Syria and attempt a bloody occupation.

The human and financial costs of this nightmare scenario are almost beyond comprehension. The European Union already strained by mass unemployment in its southern tier – could crack apart, shattering one of the premier achievements of the post-World War II era. The United States also could undergo a final transformation from a Republic into a permanent-warrior state.



Yet, Official Washington can't seem to stop itself. Instead of working with Russia and Shiite-ruled Iran to help stabilize the political/military situation in Syria, the pundit class and the "tough-guy/gal" politicians are unleashing torrents of insults toward the two countries that would be the West's natural allies in any effort to prevent a Sunni terrorist takeover.

Beyond words, there has been action. Over the past week, the State Department has pressured Bulgaria and Greece to bar Russian transport flights headed to Syria. The U.S. plan seems to be to blockade the Syrian government and starve it of outside supplies, whether humanitarian or military, all the better to force its collapse and open the Damascus city gates to the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda.

In explaining its nearly inexplicable behavior, the State Department even has adopted the silly neocon talking point which blames Assad and now Russia for creating the Islamic State, though the bloodthirsty group actually originated as "Al Qaeda in Iraq" in reaction to President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Then, backed by money and weapons from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other U.S. "allies," AQI moved into Syria with the goal of ousting Assad's relatively secular government. AQI later took the name Islamic State (also known by the acronyms ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Yet, the State Department's official position is that the Islamic State is Assad's and Russia's fault.

"What we've said is that their [the Russians'] continued support to the Assad regime has actually fostered the growth of ISIL inside Syria and made the situation worse," State Department spokesman John Kirby said on Tuesday. "If they want to be helpful against ISIL, the way to do it is to stop arming and assisting and supporting Bashar al-Assad."

Yet, the reality is that Assad's military has been the principal bulwark against both the Islamic State and the other dominant Sunni rebel force, Al Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front. So, by moving to shut down Assad's supply line, the U.S. government is, in effect, clearing the way for an Islamic State/Al Qaeda victory since the U.S.-trained "moderate" rebels are largely a fiction, numbering in double digits, while the extremists have tens of thousands of committed fighters.

In other words, if the U.S. strategy succeeds in collapsing Assad's defenses, there is really nothing to stop the Sunni terrorists from seizing Damascus and other major cities. Then, U.S. airstrikes on those population centers would surely kill many civilians and further radicalize the Sunnis. To oust the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda would require a full-scale U.S. invasion, which

might be inevitable but would almost certainly fail, much as Bush's Iraq occupation did.

## **A Scary Fantasyland**

As scary as these dangers are, there remains a huge gap between the real world of the Middle East and the fantasyland that is Official Washington's perception of the region. In that land of make-believe, what matters is tough talk from ambitious politicians and opinion leaders, what I call the "er-er-er" growling approach to geopolitics.

Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton joined in that growling on Wednesday at the Brookings Institution, which has become home to neocons such as Robert Kagan and a host of "liberal interventionists," such as Michael O'Hanlon and Strobe Talbott.

Though she formally endorsed the nuclear agreement with Iran, former Secretary of State Clinton insulted both the Iranians and the Russians. Noting Russia's support for the Syrian government, she urged increased punishment of Moscow and Russian President Vladimir Putin – aimed at forcing Russia to abandon the Assad regime.

"We need a concerted effort to up the costs on Russia and Putin; I am in the camp that we have not done enough," Clinton declared. "I don't think we can dance around it much longer," she said, claiming that Russia is trying to "stymie and undermine American power whenever and wherever they can."

Clinton appears to have learned nothing from her past support for "regime change" strategies in Iraq and Libya. In both countries, the U.S. military engineered the ouster and murder of the nations' top leaders, but instead of the promised flourishing of some ideal democracies, the countries descended into anarchy with Sunni terrorists, linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, now controlling large swaths of territory and engaging in widespread atrocities.

Yet, for Clinton, the higher priority is to come across as super-tough, proving her value to Official Washington's influential neocons and liberal hawks. Thus, a potential Clinton presidency suggests an even more warlike foreign policy than the one carried out by Obama, who recently boasted of ordering military strikes in seven different countries.

Clinton seems eager for more and more "regime changes," targeting Syria and even Russia, despite the existential risks involved in such reckless strategies, especially the notion of destabilizing nuclear-armed Russia. The neocons and liberal hawks always assume that some malleable "moderate" will take power, but the real-life experience is that U.S. interventionism often makes matters worse,

with even more extreme leaders filling the void.

### **Where's Obama?**

Now, with Official Washington lining up behind a blockade of Russian assistance to the Syrian government even if that would mean an Islamic State/Al Qaeda victory the great unknown is where President Obama stands.

A source familiar with the back channels between the White House and the Kremlin told me that Obama had encouraged Putin to step up Russian aid to the embattled Syrian government as part of the fight against the Islamic State and that the Russians are now bewildered as to why Obama's State Department is trying to sabotage those efforts.

As odd as that might sound, it would not be the first time that Obama has favored a less confrontational approach to a foreign crisis behind the scenes only to have neocon/liberal-hawk operatives inside his own administration charge off in the opposite direction. For instance, in 2009, Obama bowed to demands for what turned out to be a useless "surge" in Afghanistan, and in 2014, he allowed neocon Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to start a new Cold War with Russia by helping to orchestrate a "regime change" in Ukraine.

As Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, Nuland would presumably be at the center of the recent arm-twisting in Bulgaria and Greece to get those countries to block Russian flights to Syria, which has been a longtime neocon target for "regime change," a goal that the neocons now see as within their grasp.

Typically, when his underlings undercut him, Obama then falls in line behind them but often in a foot-dragging kind of way. Then, on occasion, he'll break ranks and make a foray into genuine diplomacy, such as Syria's 2013 agreement to surrender its chemical-weapons arsenal or Iran's 2015 nuclear deal both of which were achieved with significant help from Putin. But Obama has proved to be an unreliable foreign-policy partner, bending to the hawkish pressure from many of his subordinates and even joining in their rhetorical insults.

Today, Obama may feel that he has gone as far as he dares with the Iran nuclear deal and that any foreign policy cooperation with Iran or Russia before Congress decides on the agreement's fate by Sept. 17 could cause defections among key Democrats.

Once the deadline for congressional review passes, Obama could get serious about collaborating with Iran and Russia to stabilize the situation in Syria. By strengthening the Syrian government's military which has protected Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other minorities and incorporating reasonable Sunnis into

a power-sharing arrangement, there would be a chance to stabilize Syria and push for elections and constitutional reforms. But that would require dropping the slogan, “Assad must go!”

So, while President Obama is saying little about his Syrian plans, his State Department has moved off on its own aggressive course hoping to finally achieve the neocon/liberal-hawk dream of “regime change” in Syria regardless of what nightmares might follow.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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## Israel Lobby Stops Iran’s Help on Syria

Despite the worsening Mideast crisis, President Obama can’t escape the tight policy constraints imposed by neocon thinking. The obvious move to work with Iran to save Syria from an Islamic State or Al Qaeda victory is blocked by the influence of the Israel lobby, writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

By the logic of geopolitics, the United States and Iran ought to be cooperating to contain and weaken the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Both countries have declared that the group is a very serious threat to their own security and to the security of the entire Middle East.

Indeed, it has become evident to all – besides those who are determined for their own reasons not to see it – that the Islamic State’s intent on setting up an Islamic caliphate has the potential to dissolve the basic international order that has governed the Middle East for a century. So the logic of Iran-U.S. strategic cooperation against Daesh (as the group is referred to in Arabic) is no less compelling than was the logic of the Nixon administration in reaching an understanding with Maoist China to counter-balance their common Soviet adversary.

But that logical development isn’t happening, contrary to the fears of some and hopes of others, and it isn’t likely to happen any time soon, despite the

nuclear agreement and the Obama administration's success in beating back the unprecedented campaign by the Israel lobby to defeat it. The reason is that it is not the logic of geopolitics, in the end, that is governing the problem.

It isn't the Iranian side of the equation that is failing to follow the geopolitical logic. Contrary to the constantly reiterated propaganda theme of the anti-Iran forces in the region and in the United States that Iran's ruling elite simply wants "death to America," Iran has publicly signaled to the Obama administration repeatedly that it was open to such cooperation. But the Obama administration has refused to reciprocate, for the simple reason that it is not capable of formulating a regional policy on the basis of an objective analysis of strategic interests.

To understand the why the international politics of the Middle East are now so profoundly dysfunctional, one must begin with the contrasting modes of Iranian and American foreign policymaking. The dramatic differences between the two approaches to defining interests and policy toward the region has produced a fundamental mismatch between the U.S. and Iranian ways of responding to the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Middle East.

For Iran, geopolitics does indeed shape policy toward the region and the U.S. Iran, as a middle power that is vulnerable to threats from enemies in the region, cannot afford to base its policies on anything but a realistic appraisal of the threats and opportunities. Specifically, Iran has been facing explicit threats of attack from both Israel and the United States since the mid- to late-1990s. Now Daesh and Al Qaeda are on the offensive in Iraq and Syria, threatening the twin pillars of Iran's security strategy.

Under those circumstances, Iranian officials know that they must take advantage of any possible opening to improve relations with the United States. Iranian officials have made it clear that they are prepared to take advantage of any possibility even if slight of reaching an historic agreement with the United States that could lead to strategic understanding on the threat from Daesh.

One of the conceits of the U.S. political and national security elite is that the real power in the Islamic Republic is held by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard leadership, and that their interests lie in continuing hostility toward the United States. But that convenient belief is belied by Khamenei's own public position.

On April 9, Khamenei clearly articulated the view that Iran is ready to cooperate with the United States on regional issues if the U.S. would indicate some willingness to change its policy. In the context of the negotiations on the nuclear issue, Khamenei declared: "If the counterpart stops its bad behavior,

one could expand this experience to other issues, but if the counterpart continues its bad behavior, it would only reinforce our experiences of the past and distrust in the United States.”

Iran has made it clear that it is prepared to think creatively and flexibly about a *modus vivendi* with the United States. Last December, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, recognized that the United States was unlikely to cooperate explicitly with Iran, because of its continued support for Israel. But he suggested that a change in U.S. policy toward Israel was “not impossible” and then raised the possibility of something less than explicit cooperation.

“The two can behave in a way that they do not use their energy against each other,” he said, and he called the nuclear agreement “crucial in this regard.”

In the final round of negotiations on the nuclear agreement from late June to mid-July, Iranian officials in Vienna confirmed to me that Iran and the United States had not discussed regional issues during the nearly 18 months of negotiations. But senior Iranian officials were still holding out some hope, however slight, that the Obama administration might soften its hostility toward Iran sufficiently to make at least tacit cooperation possible once the agreement was reached and approved by Congress.

The Iranians were basing their hope on an analysis of the objective situation in the region. One official told me on July 2: “The United States doesn’t have any reason to trust its allies in regard to Daesh.” He was alluding to the well-established fact that major funding for the terrorist organization had come from Gulf Sunni regimes and that they were clearly more interested in taking down the Assad regime than in stopping Daesh. But the same official also said: “Some in the United States may see Daesh as a source of pressure on the Syrian regime.”

But while Iran acknowledges the need for a change in U.S.-Iran relations to ease regional security threats, the United States has not made a move toward any such acknowledgment. U.S. policy toward the Middle East has long been defined primarily not by threats originating in the region but by much more potent domestic political interests, both electoral and bureaucratic.

The power of the Israel lobby in Washington, primarily but not exclusively over Congress, is well known, and that has imposed a rigid political and legal framework of hostility toward Iran on the U.S. government for two decades, beginning with a complete trade embargo that remains in place and creates major obstacles to any shift in policy.

What is seldom acknowledged, however, is that the interests of the Pentagon, the

CIA and the National Security Agency have become tightly intertwined with those of the anti-Iran coalition in the Middle East. A set of mutually reinforcing bureaucratic interests now binds U.S. policy to an alliance structure and military and intelligence programs in the Middle East that have come to replace objective analysis of regional realities in determining U.S. policy.

The first is the imperative for the U.S. military of holding on to U.S. air, naval and land bases in the region, all but one of which are located in states that are part of the anti-Iran coalition. Continuing long-term control of those bases is the coin of the realm for U.S. military institutions that trumps possible competing policy concerns.

Similarly, arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf sheikhdoms and Israel are a primary interest of the Pentagon, its arms contractor partners and its congressional allies. And the determination of that same set of domestic interests to continue the bonanza or research-and-development spending on a missile defense system requires a continued identification of Iran as primary regional adversary and threat.

Finally, the U.S. national security state has never given up its ambition to regain primary influence in Iraq, despite the political legacy of the Iraq War and a Shia-dominated regime in the country. That quite unrealistic interest reduces still further the space for any cooperation with Iran in the region.

The interaction of all those dynamics leaves the Obama administration in a position where it cannot adopt a real Middle East strategy that reflects the gravity of the current situation. The paradoxical result is that, instead of responding to the regional crisis by applying creative diplomacy involving an opening to Iran, the Obama administration is reduced to maneuvering within the tight constraints imposed by the dominant political interests in cleaving to the status quo.

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## Did Saudi King ‘Snub’ Obama on Iran?

**Exclusive:** Besides following dangerous “group thinks” on big questions, like the Iraq War, the mainstream U.S. media runs as a mindless pack on smaller details, too, such as the conventional wisdom about Saudi Arabia’s “snub” of President Obama over the Iran nuclear deal, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Media coverage of politics in America all too often consists of reporters issuing seemingly authoritative declarations or quoting anonymous sources to support their prejudices about public figures. Sadly, the same lazy style of journalism, verging on malpractice, also infects coverage of foreign policy and national security, despite the profession’s soul-searching over misleading coverage leading up to the Iraq War and other notorious blunders.

The latest example could have serious consequences for public perception of the Iran nuclear deal. In the wake of Saudi King Salman’s visit to President Barack Obama last week, reporters who should know better dredged up and repeated easily refuted claims that the king “snubbed” Obama last spring to protest the then-interim “P5+1” agreement.

Their unsubstantiated claim is important for two reasons: It makes Obama look like a weak leader, out of touch with and disrespected by important U.S. allies; and it casts further doubt on the wisdom of the Iran accord, which still faces a major test in Congress.

For example, the New York Times’ Peter Baker wrote on Thursday that “King Salman, who refused Mr. Obama’s invitation to a regional summit meeting at Camp David in May in light of the discord over the Iran deal,” was only now ready to put aside his differences with the President after “months of tension.”

Similarly, Dan de Luce, chief national security correspondent for *Foreign Policy*, declared that “The newly crowned king was supposed to conduct his inaugural trip to the United States in May, but the monarch snubbed an invite to attend a summit of Gulf leaders at Camp David because of Riyadh’s strong disapproval of Washington’s nuclear negotiations with Iran.” Having “failed to stop” the agreement, Salman was now pressing Obama “to do more than simply promise to help his nation counter Iran’s proxies in the region.”

Their unqualified assertion about the Saudi snub hearkens back to political speculation, nothing more, aroused last May when King Salman canceled plans to attend a U.S.-sponsored summit of Gulf Cooperation Council leaders. At the time, Republican opponents like John McCain were, not surprisingly, quick to spin the king’s no-show as “an indicator of the lack of confidence that the Saudis and others have.”



Pundits at conservative think-tanks like the Center for Strategic and International Studies also weighed in, postulating that Salman's change of travel plans suggested "disappointment at minimum, and perhaps underlying anger that the president doesn't understand their position and doesn't want to." In a classic display of pack journalism, numerous other media outlets carried the same message without an iota of evidence.

Had the Saudis really intended that message, they could simply have refused comment or deflected questions. Instead, they refuted the speculation in no uncertain terms, both on and off the record.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, told reporters (including the Times' Peter Baker) that the 79-year-old king's decision to send his country's two top officials, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the defense minister, to the summit was no slight.

"The idea that this is a snub because the king did not attend is really off base," he insisted. "The fact that our crown prince and deputy crown prince attend an event outside of Saudi Arabia at the same time is unprecedented." Al-Jubeir said the king decided to stay home to monitor the expanding war in Yemen and pursue a cease-fire.

Speaking off the record, a "person close to the Saudi government" told the Washington Post that "the decision was a combination of the situation in Yemen and what is to be the 'technical nature' of the conversations about Iran at the summit, which the king felt the senior officials in the delegation . . . were better equipped to handle. 'They did not mean it as a snub,' the person close to the Saudi government said. 'They were not trying to send a message.'"

Moreover, contrary to much media speculation, the Saudis were already publicly on board with the Iran negotiations, albeit with caveats about the need to counter alleged Iranian meddling in the region. Back in April, Saudi Arabia's council of ministers, the king's cabinet, said it welcomed the interim P5+1 deal with Iran and "expressed hope for attaining a binding and definitive agreement that would lead to the strengthening of security and stability in the region and the world."

No wonder, then, Saudi Arabia today says "We believe this agreement will contribute to security and stability in the region by preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability."

Now, even if Saudi Arabia's king really had snubbed President Obama and opposed the Iran nuclear deal, both actions might have spoken well for the U.S. leader. Contrary to the subtext of most stories citing the "snub," there's no good

reason why a harshly autocratic, reactionary regime founded on primitive Islamist doctrines should guide U.S. interests or policy.

But many casual media consumers will inevitably accept the unexamined assumptions of recent coverage of Saudi-U.S. relations and its implicit critique of the Obama administration. It takes close attention, more than most readers can spare, to see through the misreporting and spin that passes for foreign policy journalism at many of America's leading media.

If one of the primary purposes of such journalism is to enlighten the public and support more educated citizen debate in our democracy, all too many reporters today are failing at their job.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions"; "Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran"; "Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor"; "The Saudis' Hurt Feelings"; "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster"; "The US Hand in the Syrian Mess"; and "Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War." ]

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## Israel's Bitter Anti-Iran Fight

Israeli leaders put on a full-court press to coerce U.S. lawmakers to line up behind Prime Minister Netanyahu instead of President Obama on the Iran nuclear deal. The Israel ploy appears to not only have failed but to have exposed deep divisions in the Jewish community, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

The insistence that Israel is somehow the national embodiment of the Jewish people has always been dangerous. This is so because it tied a diverse group spread over the globe to the apron strings of a single political entity and its ideology (Zionism). Thus identified, the Jews were allegedly what a bunch of Zionist ideologues said they were – and were also supposedly exemplified by the consistently unsavory practices of the Israeli state.

The Zionists tried to force the Jews into this Procrustean bed through the monopolization of elite Jewish organizations and the emotional blackmail of those who might have dissenting views. The mantra here was that if a Jewish person had disagreements with Israel, he or she should express them behind closed doors and never in public.

Behind closed doors the dissenter could be contained. However, if he or she went public with their differences, they undercut the myth of Jewish community solidarity with Israel. To go public in this fashion was a mortal sin, and one risked being shamed within one's community. Those who persisted were labeled "self-hating" traitors.

It is a long-standing effort at censorship. Some people might get upset with those who publicly accuse Charles Schumer of having dual loyalties involving Israel, but no one seemed to get equally upset with those Zionists who have accused thousands of Jews worldwide of being "self-haters" because they publicly came out against Israel's atrocious treatment of the Palestinians.

### **On "Verge of Fratricide"**

It was inevitable that the Zionist requirement of public silence would get harder to enforce the more outrageous the behavior of Israel's political leadership became.

On the American scene, the combination of the brazen intrusion of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu into U.S. politics (particularly his March 3, 2015 address to Congress) and the warmongering position on Iran taken by Jewish organizations openly allied to Israel seems to have been the tipping point. The combined adavance of this Zionist front has forced American Jewish members of Congress to make a choice, and do so publicly. Those who have chosen, against the wishes of the Israeli government, to support the Iran nuclear agreement as reflecting the long-term interests of the United States (and Israel) are now treated to the same degree of defamation as those Jews called "self-haters."

A national window on what Greg Rosenbaum, chairman of the National Jewish Democratic Council, calls "the verge of fratricide in the Jewish community" was opened by a front-page article in the Aug. 29 issue of the *New York Times*, entitled "Debate on Iran Fiercely Splits American Jews."

The *Times'* main example of this near-fratricidal behavior is the case of Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-New York, who, like the state's senior senator, Charles Schumer, has spent his entire political career supporting Israel. The only difference between the two is that unlike Schumer, Nadler has come out in support of the Iran agreement. But that is all it took to make him a target.

According to an interview with Nadler in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* and reprinted in the Aug. 25 edition of the *Forward*, the New York representative was hit by "vociferous attacks" labeling him a "traitor," one who wants to "abandon the Jewish people." According to the *Times'* piece, he has also been called a Kapo (the name given to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis), and a "facilitator

of Obama's Holocaust."

New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind, a Zionist stalwart, has sworn to work for Nadler's defeat come the representative's next primary election and has been harassing him in various ways ever since he announced his support for the Iran deal.

This sort of thing has been going on across the nation where American Jewry interfaces with national politics. It is interesting that the one who is trying to bring civility back into this internecine debate is a Gentile: Barack Obama.

Again, according to the *Times'* article, Obama, speaking on "a webcast for major Jewish organizations," called the treatment of Nadler "appalling" and then, ignoring a fast unraveling political status quo, said "we're all pro-Israel, and we're family." Nonetheless, he concluded that "It's better to air these things out even if it is uncomfortable, as long as the tone is civil." Alas, President Obama sounds like a marriage counselor who comes too late to the party.

### **Persistent Incivility**

The truth is that the tone of the edicts coming out of Israel both past and present, and then transmitted by elite Jewish-Zionist organizations down the line to the synagogues and community centers in the United States, has never been civil. Israel's self-righteous position has always been that it has an unquestionable right to tell American Jewry when to support or not support their own (that is U.S.) national interests.

And if you don't follow the Israeli lead, you will be accused of betraying "your people." This persistent incivility has just been below the U.S.'s public radar until now. We can all thank Netanyahu and his Likudniks for the fact that that is no longer the case.

So what does this mean for the future of U.S.- Israeli relations? Well, according to the *Times*, some are predicting "long-term damage to Jewish organizations and possibly to American-Israeli relations." One thing is for sure, the abrasive Zionist modus operandi will not change. It is built in to the historical character of both their ideology and Israeli culture.

The real questions lie on the American side of the equation. For instance, will American politicians who have belatedly become uneasy with Israeli behavior come to understand that what they face is a fundamental difference in worldview?

Jeremy Ben-Ami, the head of JStreet, in a rare moment of clarity, was cited in the *Times'* article as having spoken of "a fundamental break between Democratic Party leaders inclined toward diplomacy and the worldview of a conservative

Israeli government which has more in common with Dick Cheney.” Ben-Ami is surely correct here, even though he shortsightedly confines the problem to the current Israeli government.

A corresponding question is will American Jews who disagree with Israeli policies come to realize that this is more than a family squabble? It is a fundamental break between those who favor humanitarian values and sensible diplomacy, and those who favor the ways of war and ethno-religious discrimination.

In truth, American Jews who support civil and human rights have no more in common with Israel and its culture than they do with xenophobic fanatics of the Republican Right. They just have to accept that fact and, on the basis of that awareness, take a public stand.

It is probably accurate to describe current events as doing lasting damage to American Jewish organizations. It is not the case that “names can never hurt you,” and there has been a lot of harsh name-calling within these groups. From the anti-Zionist perspective this is all for the good. These organizations had long ago turned into fronts for Israel and have been hurting, not helping, American Jews.

As for the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, it is hard to know if the storm that has blown up over the nuclear agreement with Iran has delivered a lasting blow. The Zionist lobby still has a lot of financial power and an increasingly firm alliance with the Republican Right. And, who knows, we might someday see those barbarians back in the White House.

On the other hand, that evolving alliance will continue to alienate more liberal Jews and Democratic politicians. The safest prediction to make is that while recent events might not spell the end of America’s “special relationship” with Israel, they are surely a big step in the right direction.

**Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*; *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.**

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## In Bed with the Reactionary Saudis

The U.S.-Saudi alliance is no longer just an anachronism. It has become a dangerous anachronism with the Saudis implicating the United States in their

brutal sectarian conflicts, such as the wars in Yemen and Syria, and in their reactionary human rights policies, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Saudi King Salman visits Washington amid disagreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia on a broad range of issues. Moreover, the disagreements are rooted in fundamental characteristics of the anachronistic Saudi regime.

Many regimes around the world, and the political and social systems of which they are a part, are markedly different from what is found in the United States, but the Saudi polity is one of the most different. The anachronism that is Saudi Arabia represents a major problem for U.S. foreign policy, both because of the impact Saudi-related matters have on the Middle East and beyond and because of the close association between Saudi Arabia and the United States that has come to be taken for granted.

Little of this has anything to do with the just-completed agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program, despite the attention that subject has been receiving. Riyadh is more likely to accept the agreement as a done deal, and already has publicly indicated its formal acceptance, than the accord's opponents in the United States and Israel.

The Saudis will continue to look for ways to discourage others, including the United States, from developing warm relations with their rival across the Persian Gulf, but this will not preclude the Saudis themselves, along with the other Gulf Arabs, from undertaking their own rapprochement with Tehran, just as they have done in the past.

In hot spot after hot spot in the Middle East, U.S. and Saudi objectives and priorities diverge, even if in some loose sense they are considered to be on the same side. In war-torn Syria, the United States and Saudi Arabia have never agreed on whether the ouster of the Assad regime or the containment of ISIS should be the main objective.

Saudi priorities are based on a variety of considerations that are specific to it and not to the United States, including hatred of the Assads for whatever role they may have played in the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, a special friend of the Saudis. Reflecting the different priorities and objectives is disagreement over selection and vetting of Syrian rebels to be deemed worthy of support.

In Iraq, Saudi priorities are influenced by some of the same sectarian motives that shape Saudi policy toward Syria. And again, such motives are quite different from U.S. interests. Desired overthrow of the regime is not the factor

that it is in Syria, but distrust of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad is a major part of the Saudi approach toward Iraq.

In Yemen, the United States has allowed itself to become associated with a destructive and misguided Saudi military expedition, and thus also with the humanitarian tragedy that the operation has entailed. The main Saudi objective is to show who's boss on the Arabian Peninsula, another objective not shared with the United States. Saudi Arabia's operation has shown itself, more so than Iran, to be a destabilizing force intent on throwing its weight around in the neighborhood.

In his most recent column Tom Friedman identifies what may be the most worrisome thing about Saudi Arabia for U.S. interests: "the billions and billions of dollars the Saudis have invested since the 1970s into wiping out the pluralism of Islam, the Sufi, moderate Sunni and Shiite versions, and imposing in its place the puritanical, anti-modern, anti-women, anti-Western, anti-pluralistic Wahhabi Salafist brand of Islam promoted by the Saudi religious establishment."

Friedman notes that Islamist extremist groups that the United States has come to consider preeminent security concerns, including Al Qaeda and now ISIS, "are the ideological offspring of the Wahhabism injected by Saudi Arabia into mosques and madrasas from Morocco to Pakistan to Indonesia."

The specific terrorist consequences of what the Saudis have done is justifiably an immediate concern for U.S. policy-makers. But the underlying bargain that Ibn Saud, the founder of the current Saudi kingdom, reached years ago with the Wahhabis also underlies much else that makes Saudi Arabia what it is today, and makes it the problem that it is. The kingdom's troublesome characteristics are inextricably linked to how Ibn Saud's offspring are trying to claim legitimacy and thus to cling to power.

Consider some of the chief characteristics of the kingdom. Saudi Arabia is a family-run enterprise in which the distribution and exercise of political power are every bit as medieval as they ever were in any country ruled by the Plantagenets. There is no religious freedom. Human rights in many other respects are sorely lacking. Women are still subordinated. It was considered a big deal when they recently were told they could vote and run as candidates, in elections to local councils with scant power and in which the king will still appoint half the members, but women still cannot function as independent persons in many aspects of daily life. They still are not allowed to drive.

It ought to be astounding that a place this far removed from the liberal democratic values with which the United States likes to be associated, even without considering the aforementioned divergence of objectives elsewhere in the

region, still is considered a close partner of the United States. The usual, and to a large degree valid, explanation is that, as Friedman puts it, “we’re addicted to their oil and addicts never tell the truth to their pushers.”

But there is another American attitude involved, which persists even in the shale-fracking era. Once a nation is considered a partner or ally in a region that is perceptually divided into allies and adversaries, the perceived line-up tends to stay fixed until and unless there is a political alteration sufficiently great to be labeled regime change.

And regime change would be the most troubling chapter of all in the Saudi story. Some Saudi leaders, including the late King Abdullah, seem to have recognized the need to move in the direction of modernization and liberalization, even if only at the glacial pace that is possible in a Wahhabi-committed family enterprise.

It is an open question whether the regime will be able to keep this kind of change ahead of demands for change of a more drastic and radical sort. If it fails to do so, and the revolution comes, then the association of the United States with the *ancien régime* will be an even greater problem for U.S. policy-makers than what they face now.

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## Dangerous Redefinition of ‘Terrorism’

**Exclusive:** “Terrorism” is a word of condemnation, referring to the coldblooded killing of civilians to advance a political cause. But U.S. pundits and officials have blurred its meaning to cover attacks on American soldiers in foreign lands, a word game that can contribute to more wars, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The classic definition of terrorism is the intentional killing of civilians to make a political point, as in planting bombs near the finish line of a marathon or crashing commercial jetliners into buildings filled with office workers. Yet, the mainstream U.S. media has broadened the definition to include killing U.S. soldiers or allied troops even those operating in foreign lands.



For instance, New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman on Wednesday cited as a supposed example of “Iran’s terrorism” the bombing of the Marine base in Beirut in 1983, “believed to be the handiwork of Iran’s cat’s paw, Hezbollah.” And Friedman is hardly alone in citing the Marine bombing in 1983 as “terrorism” along with Iran’s support for Shiite militias who fought the American occupying army in Iraq last decade.

The U.S. media routinely treats such cases as deserving of the unqualified condemnation that the word “terrorism” implies. Similarly, that attitude is extended to Hezbollah attacks on Israeli military forces even in the 1980s when Israel was occupying southern Lebanon.

But attacks aimed at military forces not civilians are not “terrorism” in the classic definition. And this is an important distinction because the word carries deservedly negative moral and legal implications that can put those nations accused of “terrorism” in the cross-hairs of economic sanctions and military attacks that can kill hundreds of thousands and even millions of civilians.

In other words, abuse of the word “terrorism” can have similar consequences as terrorism itself, the indiscriminate deaths of innocent people – men, women and children. Much of the case for sanctions and war against Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s was based on dubious and even false claims about Iraq’s alleged support for Al Qaeda and other terrorists.

And, the 1983 case is especially significant because it is a go-to emotional argument in accusing Iran of having “American blood on its hands” and thus unworthy of any normal diplomatic relations. However, when examining the real history behind the Marine barracks bombing, a much more complex and nuanced story unfolds with blame to be apportioned to all sides.

The immediate context for the tragedy was Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the multi-sided civil war raging among Lebanese factions. Israeli invaders reached the Lebanese capital of Beirut in a matter of days as part of a campaign to crush the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Then, after more fighting and protracted negotiations, Israel forced the P.L.O. to leave Lebanon, departing for Tunisia. But the P.L.O. left behind women and children in refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila, where Israeli officers allowed Israeli-supported Christian militia forces to massacre more than 700 and possibly thousands of Palestinian and Shiite civilians, one of the most shocking atrocities of the war.

Into this chaos, President Ronald Reagan dispatched a force of Marines as

peacekeepers, but they gradually were pulled into the fighting on the side of Israel and its militia allies.

National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, who often represented Israel's interests in the upper echelons of the Reagan administration, convinced the President to authorize the USS New Jersey to fire long-distance shells into Muslim villages, killing civilians and convincing Shiite militants that the United States had joined the conflict.

On Oct. 23, 1983, Shiite militants struck back, sending a suicide truck bomber through U.S. security positions, demolishing the high-rise Marine barracks in Beirut and killing 241 American servicemen. Reagan soon repositioned the surviving U.S. forces offshore.

Though the U.S. news media immediately labeled the Marine barracks bombing an act of "terrorism," Reagan administration insiders knew better, recognizing that McFarlane's "mission creep" had made the U.S. troops vulnerable to retaliation.

"When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American 'referee' had taken sides," Gen. Colin Powell wrote in his memoir, *My American Journey*. In other words, Powell, who was then military adviser to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, recognized that the actions of the U.S. military had altered the status of the Marines in the eyes of the Shiites.

Reagan's redeployment of the Marines offshore also didn't end U.S. intervention in Lebanon. The tit-for-tat violence in Beirut continued. CIA Director William Casey ordered secret counterterrorism operations against Islamic radicals and dispatched veteran CIA officer William Buckley. But on March 14, 1984, Buckley was spirited off the streets of Beirut to face torture and death.

In 1985, Casey targeted Hezbollah leader Sheikh Fadhallah in an operation that included hiring operatives who detonated a car bomb outside the Beirut apartment building where Fadhallah lived.

As described by Bob Woodward in *Veil*, "the car exploded, killing 80 people and wounding 200, leaving devastation, fires and collapsed buildings. Anyone who had happened to be in the immediate neighborhood was killed, hurt or terrorized, but Fadhallah escaped without injury. His followers strung a huge 'Made in the USA' banner in front of a building that had been blown out."

In other words, the U.S. government dove into the bloody swamp of terrorism even as it was condemning other parties of engaging in terrorism. But the moral morass that was Lebanon, circa 1982-85, is not what Friedman and other U.S. propagandists describe when they smear Iran as some particularly evil force. Nor

does Friedman operate with an objective definition of terrorism.

As Colin Powell recognized, once the United States joined the Lebanese civil war as a belligerent, U.S. troops became legitimate targets for retaliation. As much as one may lament the deaths of 241 U.S. personnel (or any deaths for that matter), it was not an act of "terrorism."

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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