

Giving Saudis a Pass on Yemen War

By supporting Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen, the U.S. is again finding itself on the same side with Al Qaeda in a Mideast conflict, a troubling pattern driven by a compulsion to excuse actions by U.S. "allies" no matter how outrageous, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The killing earlier this week of at least 131 civilians at a wedding party was only the latest and deadliest event in a campaign of airstrikes in Yemen by a foreign coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) reports that during a six-month period from late March until last week (even before the incident involving the wedding) at least 2,355 civilians had been killed in the fighting in Yemen, with almost two-thirds of the deaths caused by airstrikes conducted by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies.

The same Saudi-led coalition is maintaining a blockade of Yemen's main seaports that has further exacerbated a humanitarian crisis in which, according to UNHCR, four out of five Yemenis require assistance.

This carnage and associated suffering are being largely overlooked and even excused in the United States. In fact, according to official White House statements, the Obama administration is providing "logistical and intelligence support" to the Saudi-led military intervention.

Insufficient attention to what is really going on in Yemen can be partly explained by the distractions of what is going on elsewhere in the Middle East. Most recently this has included the Russian military intervention in Syria, which has received far more attention than the Yemeni war but, especially with this week's Russian airstrikes, is remarkably similar in both nature and purpose to what the Saudis are doing in Yemen.

Another major reason for the inappropriate American attitudes and posture toward what is going on in Yemen is a habit of rigidly thinking of all events especially in the Middle East in terms of a fixed line-up of "allies" and foes, without regard to any consistency in upholding standards of international behavior or to any careful consideration of where U.S. interests do and do not lie.

The single biggest member of this perceived, mind-numbing line-up of foes is Iran, the focus of the politically correct habit of thinking of it as nothing but a foe, and the arch-foe in the region at that. The required ritual

references to “nefarious” Iranian activity that is “destabilizing” the Middle East flow off lips so automatically they probably could flow in one’s sleep, and are routinely uttered with no reference at all to what Iran actually is or is not doing in the region.

The Iranian connection to the Yemeni conflict is Tehran’s sympathy, and some undetermined degree of material support, for the Houthis, who have been one of the most significant and successful players in that multidimensional conflict.

The Houthi movement has been a major player in Yemen for over a decade and has needed no instigation from Iran to assert itself. For the Houthis, who are Zaidi Shiites, the motivations for assertion include concern over the rise of Sunni extremism, including in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as well as longer-standing issues of distribution of political and economic power within Yemen.

Iran’s perspective is based partly on sectarian sympathy, although amid a region and a wider Muslim world in which Sunnis outnumber Shiites, Tehran does not have any strong incentive to exacerbate sectarian conflict. Iran tried to dissuade the Houthis from moving against the Yemeni capital Sana, but the Houthis ignored that advice and captured the city anyway. In any event, whatever material aid Iran has given to the Houthis pales in comparison with the direct air, ground and naval role that Saudi Arabia and its allies are playing in Yemen.

The Houthis’ activity is only a part of a bigger and more complex set of conflicts in Yemen, a country where no one has ever really controlled the whole thing and that was not even officially a single country until North and South Yemen merged in 1990. Southern resistance to what is seen as northern domination of the merged state has ever since been a major part of Yemeni instability.

The instability of more recent years was initiated not by anything the Houthis did but instead by an Arab Spring-style uprising that pushed out the longstanding president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was replaced by Saleh’s former vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, whose claim to legitimacy was an “election” in which he was the only candidate, who himself later became the target of demonstrations for not carrying out promised reforms, and whom the Saudis wound up taking under their wing.

Perhaps the most significant development leading to the current level of violence and suffering in Yemen was the accession to power in Riyadh of King Salman and his young son the defense minister and aspirant to the throne, who decided to use Yemen to make a statement about who’s boss in the Arabian Peninsula.

To appreciate the inconsistency in the application in Yemen of standards of international behavior, imagine that Iran had been doing anything like what the Saudis have been doing in Yemen, including using its air force to conduct strikes like the one against the wedding party. The uproar in this country would be deafening, perhaps enough to derail the recently completed nuclear agreement.

There is no good justification for the United States to be identifying itself with, much less materially supporting, the Saudi intervention in Yemen. It is supporting the cause of most of the destruction and suffering in the country, rather than reducing the destruction and suffering (although the United States is furnishing some humanitarian aid for Yemen).

It is earning opprobrium and resentment for being associated with the Saudi campaign. It is making matters even worse for itself by knuckling under to the Saudi preference to prevent even an impartial United Nations inquiry into wartime excesses by all sides in the Yemeni conflict, including the Houthis.

The United States does not have a direct stake in the internal contests for power and influence in Yemen. Even if it did, it would be hard to explain the side it is taking now. Saleh was considered a U.S. partner during his long time in power, and now he is allied with the Houthis.

The United States does have a stake in how instability in Yemen can reverberate in the form of transnational terrorism and extremism, but again it is on the wrong side. The Houthi movement does not do international terrorism. AQAP certainly does, and it has tried to do it repeatedly against the United States. In the otherwise confused lines of conflict within Yemen, the Houthis and AQAP are each other's clearest enemies.

And the United States certainly does not have a good reason to take sides in sectarian conflicts in Yemen or anywhere else in the Muslim world.

Mistaken policies such as the U.S. posture toward Yemen will continue as long as U.S. policy is made in a domestic political climate in which prevailing sentiment automatically labels some foreign states as "allies" and others as practitioners of "nefarious" behavior, and insists that the United States always align itself with the former and always oppose anything having to do with the latter.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Why Iran Is Aiding Syria

In spinning another propaganda theme, Official Washington is putting out the storyline that Iran is supporting Syria only to appease hardliners in Tehran, but the reality is that top Iranian leaders agree that a victory by the Islamic State or Al Qaeda must be prevented, writes Gareth Porter at Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's address at the UN General Assembly and a talk the previous night to about 150 Americans touted the recent nuclear breakthrough as a precedent for further diplomatic accommodation with the United States. But both speeches also called on Washington to change its policy toward the conflicts in the Middle East.

Despite notable differences between the two presentations, the thrust of Rouhani's argument was that Iran is ready to apply the style of diplomacy that brought about the nuclear breakthrough to conflicts in the Middle East, but that it could not accept a U.S. policy that puts the survival of the Syrian state at risk.

In the UN speech, Rouhani called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the official name for the nuclear deal) an historic "victory over war" but had harsh words for U.S. support for the destabilizing policies of its allies in the region.

In the talk to the American audience, which this writer attended, he was more precise on both scores. He offered to apply the model of "win-win" negotiations to a peaceful settlement of the war in Yemen that would involve all Yemeni parties to the conflict. He vowed, "We are willing to help with actionable measures to maintain everyone's safety."

But Rouhani was also very firm in insisting that the United States should agree to common actions to stop the threat of a takeover by "Daesh" (the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State, ISIS, or ISIL) before discussing the fate of the Assad regime.

"The priority" on Syria, he said, "is the duty to collaborate against terrorism," although he then added that this "doesn't mean a future form of government in Damascus should not be thought of."

In the past, Obama administration officials and their think tank advisers have explained Iran's support for the Syrian war against ISIS as an indication that Rouhani – and perhaps even Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as well – have to placate

the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps by supporting its operations in Syria and Lebanon.

But that politically convenient interpretation ignores the fundamental fact that Iran's national security strategy has had two primary objectives ever since Khamenei became Iran's leader: to integrate the Iranian economy into the global system of finance and technology and to deter the threats from the United States and Israel. And Rouhani had primary responsibility for achieving both tasks.

When Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani succeeded Khamenei as president in 1989, he chose Rouhani to be the secretary of the newly-created Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Rafsanjani was the leader of the political faction that favored a more liberal economic policy for Iran and was determined to find a way to end the hostility between Iran and the United States.

It is well known that Khamenei and Rafsanjani have long been political rivals with different visions of Iranian society and economy. What is much less well known is that it was Rafsanjani who nominated Khamenei to succeed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini after Khomeini's death in 1989. After Rafsanjani was elected president in 1989, the two figures agreed that Iran should test Washington's willingness to enter into a dialogue with Iran.

Rouhani remained in the position of secretary of the SNSC until 2005 the equivalent of serving as national security adviser for three or four successive U.S. administrations of different parties. The remarkable continuity that he brought to Iran's foreign policy during that 16-year period was a reflection of the confidence that Khamenei placed in him. Rouhani's best-known accomplishment was his astute management of Iran's nuclear policy when the Bush administration was threatening to take Iran to the UN Security Council from 2003-05.

But more fundamental to Khamenei's confidence in Rouhani was certainly the fact that he presided over the building of a successful Iranian deterrence strategy. Iran's unique approach to defense policy is the result of its relative conventional military weakness and the serious possibility of an attack on Iran from the United States or Israel from the early 1990s on.

The Clinton administration's demonization of Iran as a "rogue state" and its accusations of Iranian WMD ambitions and terrorism against the United States left little doubt in Tehran that a possible U.S. air attack against Iran had to be deterred. Meanwhile, both Labor and Likud governments in Israel were making explicit threats to attack Iran's nuclear and missile programs from 1995 through 1997.

Since Iran lacked an air force, Rouhani and the SNSC adopted an unorthodox

deterrence strategy. In the mid-1990s, Iran began developing an intermediate range missile that could strike Iraq and that would, with later redesign, be able to reach Israeli targets as well as all U.S. military bases in the region. But that would take the IRGC several more years and was subject to a number of uncertainties.

In the meantime, Iran's ties with Hezbollah provided a more immediate capability. Beginning in 2000, Iran provided thousands of rockets to Hezbollah for retaliation against northern Israel in case of a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran.

When Israel launched its war in Southern Lebanon in 2006, it was to destroy the key element in Iran's deterrent. General Mohsen Rezai, the former head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, commented explicitly on that central reason for the Israeli attack. "Israel and the U.S. knew that as long as Hamas and Hezbollah were there," he said, "confronting Iran would be costly".

The Israeli war to disarm Hezbollah was a major failure, however, and Iran then supplied Hezbollah with far more numerous, more accurate and longer-range missiles and rockets, to supplement the few hundred Iranian missiles capable of reaching Israeli targets.

But Hezbollah's role in Iranian deterrence depended on the ability to supply Hezbollah through Syrian territory. The Israelis schemed unsuccessfully for years to exploit that potential Iranian vulnerability by trying to get the United States to overthrow the Assad regime militarily. Now, however, ISIS and Al Qaeda are threatening to accomplish what the Israelis had failed to do.

That is why Iran's commitment to the defense of the Assad regime is not a function of the power of the IRGC, but a requirement on which Rouhani and Khamenei are in full agreement. Rouhani's dual message of diplomatic engagement with Washington and insistence that cooperation on resisting "Daesh" is the priority in Syria reflect the essentials of Iran's national security strategy.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This story previously appeared at Middle East Eye, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/rouhani-s-dual-messages-and-iran-s-security-strategy-1712351174>

Putin's Judo Move in Syria

Exclusive: Official Washington loves to hate Russian President Putin, especially when he obstructs a neocon "regime change" scheme, with that animus now focused on Putin's concern that overthrowing Syria's government would risk a disastrous victory by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, says Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

After delivering arms to Bashar al-Assad's besieged government in Syria and meeting with the leaders of Turkey, Israel and Palestine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has again made headlines by negotiating an agreement with Iraq, Iran and Syria to share intelligence about the growing threat from the Islamic State.

Washington was taken aback to see the U.S.-installed government in Iraq joining in the initiative. So was *The New York Times*, which for days had taken part in a White House-orchestrated campaign to poke fun at Putin and to make light of his efforts against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh.

After a series of increasingly silly articles accusing the Russian leader of "play[ing] the statesman" in order to distract his countrymen from a sinking ruble and acting as a wannabe "man of action" plagued by feelings of "insecurity and fear of displaying weakness," Michael R. Gordon, the *Times*' in-house hawk, was reduced to arguing that Putin's real goal in Syria is to attack "opposition fighters who are focused on battling Mr. Assad's government and who are also backed by the United States."

It was a last-ditch effort to discredit a leader who has convinced three major players in the Middle East that his anti-ISIS credentials are genuine. But since the U.S. is obviously befuddled by Russia's foray into Middle East politics, it seems appropriate to ask: what is Putin really up to? If he is clearly more than the Russian Walter Mitty that the *Times* has made him out to be, then what is his real goal in Syria to combat ISIS or something more?

A clue comes from the same *Times* news analysis depicting Putin as a would-be superhero filled with fear and insecurity. "Although he liked to portray himself as a young tough raised in Leningrad," reporter Steven Lee Myers wrote in the Sunday Opinion section, "he took up martial arts as a slight boy, by his own account, to protect himself from courtyard bullies." Whether or not the strategy worked judo's real-life effectiveness is subject to debate it may provide insight into his diplomatic strategy.

After all, judo rests on the idea that a smaller, weaker person can use his

opponent's size and strength to his own advantage. Although Russia still controls a formidable nuclear arsenal, its power has obviously faded from Soviet days, and it is plainly no match for the U.S., whose military expenditures, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, outrank it by better than seven to one.

So what should Russia do against the world's sole remaining superpower? The answer is to take a lesson from the judo handbook and wait for the right moment to use America's clout against it. That moment may be now. Washington has obliged Putin by painting itself into a corner in not just one, but two crisis zones, eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Driving East

The first is a result of America's own *drang nach osten*, the German drive to the east that culminated in Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Decades later, version 2.0 has taken NATO right up to Russia's doorstep.

As ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern has shown the legendary Texas fixer James Baker, George H.W. Bush's secretary of state, assured Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 that if he said yes to German reunification under NATO auspices, there would be "no expansion of NATO jurisdiction to the east, not one inch." [See Consortiumnews.com's "How NATO Jabs Russia on Ukraine."]

Yet beginning in 1994, after the Soviet Union had collapsed, Bill Clinton declared that NATO should "should enlarge steadily, deliberately, openly," while Republicans pushed for an even more aggressive policy. Beginning in 1999, NATO thus signed up a dozen new members, three of them Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania bordering on Russia directly.

Coupled with the unprecedented social and economic collapse under Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Zbigniew Brzezinski's call in his 1997 bestseller *The Grand Chessboard* for breaking up Russia into three separate parts and surrounding it with a ring of hostile states, the effect was to trigger alarms across the Russian Federation.

But the effect was not only to ratchet up Russian fears, but trigger a nationalist chain reaction across the entire region. At the prodding of super-hawk Sen. John McCain, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili launched an "ill-planned reconquista" of the breakaway province of South Ossetia, which led to a thorough thrashing at the hands of the Russian military.

Plans for Ukraine's entry into NATO continued apace despite a confidential warning by William J. Burns, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, that "the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some

claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.”

In December 2013, with Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland bragging that Washington had “invested more than \$5 billion” to steer Ukrainian politics in a pro-U.S. direction, the stage was set for the Maidan protests and the country’s final splintering. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Neocons and the Ukraine Coup.](#)”]

Although the Obama administration blamed Russia for the secessionist movements that broke out in the Russian-speaking east, the Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko argued that the rebellions in Crimea and the Donbas were a “[mirror image](#)” of the Maidan protests in the west, driven by the same mix “of just causes and irrational fears.”

Putin saw what was happening and took advantage of it by absorbing the Crimea. But if anyone engineered the crisis, it was the U.S., which aggressively encouraged Ukrainian nationalists to press ahead with their coup d’État.

In Ukraine, the U.S. has found itself backing a government under growing threat from neo-Nazi forces that had spearheaded the Maidan protests. Elsewhere in eastern Europe, the U.S. found itself grappling with a rising tide of nationalism and xenophobia. Presumably, this is not a position that President Obama wanted to be in, but one from which there was no escape.

Cornered in the Mideast

America’s plight in the Middle East is even worse. There, it finds itself at the mercy of two increasingly troublesome allies. The first is Israel, an “ethno-state” straight out of the strife-torn 1930s, as the historian Tony Judt famously [argued](#), one in which Jewish supremacists rule over an Arab majority in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel proper.

For a quarter of a century, the U.S. has gone through the motions of overseeing negotiations for an independent Palestinian state, yet the situation has only deteriorated as the talks have dragged on. Israeli intransigence has been one factor in the ongoing debacle, but so is the sheer impracticality of trying to carve out two separate nations in a strife-torn area roughly the size of Massachusetts.

But America’s other ally Saudi Arabia may even be worse. One of the most dysfunctional states in history, it is both an absolute monarchy and an out-of-control kleptocracy ruled by thousands of princes who siphon off oil revenue, muscle in on local businesses, and jet off to Europe to visit the most exclusive shops and brothels.

When King Salman visited the French Riviera for a vacation, he stipulated that the local beach be sealed off to outsiders and two policewomen be removed to protect his privacy. When he visited Washington in early September, he booked the entire 222-room Four Seasons Hotel for him and his entourage and redecorated it with red carpets and gold furniture.

Yet behind all this opulence and bling stands a grim Wahhabist religious establishment that is the perfect complement to the ultra-orthodox rabbinate in Israel, one that is xenophobic, intolerant, and as thoroughly jihadist as any ISIS militant.

Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars building mosques and madrasas in order to spread fundamentalist Wahhabism across the globe. But the more it has expanded its ideological reach, the more it has come into conflict with Shi'ism and other dissident branches of Islam.

As Bandar bin Sultan, the longtime Saudi ambassador to the U.S., once remarked to Richard Dearlove, chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service: "The time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally 'God help the Shia.' More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them."

The result years later is a growing Saudi war of aggression against a "Shi'ite crescent" aggression that has led to nightly bombing raids in Yemen, a brutal crackdown on democratic protesters in Shi'ite-majority Bahrain, and funding for Sunni Islamist rebels in Syria who are at war with the Shi'ite-led government in Damascus. [See Consortiumnews.com's "America's Dead-End in the Middle East."]

Presumably, this is not a spot that Obama wants to be in. He would no doubt like to combat ISIS. But since Saudi Arabia's top priority is toppling Assad, Obama holds his fire against ISIS when it is engaged in battle with Syrian government troops, according to *The New York Times*, and Obama looks the other way when the kingdom supplies Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, with U.S.-made TOW missiles. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda."]

Obama also provides military assistance to the Saudis in their senseless war against Yemen because he can't do otherwise without jeopardizing his relationship with King Salman. The U.S. is tied to the Saudis by oil and military weaponry, so there is a strong motive to play along.

Judo Skills

This is where Putin's judo skills come in. Essentially, the Russian president wants three things. Due to what even the *Times* admits is a growing danger of blowback – Putin is all too aware that 2,400 Russians have joined ISIS along with another 3,000 jihadis from formerly Soviet Central Asia – he wants a

genuine multi-national effort to destroy ISIS and Al Nusra, not the pseudo-campaign put together by Washington and Riyadh.

Putin wants to buttress the Assad government not only because it is a longtime ally of Russia and the Soviets, but because its fall would pave the way for the ultimate nightmare of an ISIS takeover in Damascus. And Putin wants the U.S. to lift trade sanctions put in place following the absorption of the Crimea.

So far, Putin is ahead on the first two points and making steady progress on the third. Appalled by results of U.S.-sponsored regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the world's public sentiment is aghast to see America embarking on the same ill-conceived venture in Syria. This is the case not only in the Third World which is never happy seeing an imperial power stomping on an ex-colony, but in the European Union, currently reeling under the impacts of thousands of Middle Eastern refugees fleeing from the results of U.S.-backed "regime change."

Further, bombing ISIS or Al Qaeda positions in Syria without Damascus' permission is a flagrant violation of international law. Yet Obama clings to the traditional U.S. position that it is legal if the U.S. does it because the U.S. is the global sovereign and therefore makes its own law. But growing numbers no longer see it that way.

The idea of battling ISIS but standing off while it battles Assad may make sense among foreign-policy "experts" in Washington, London and Paris. But this "strategy" is wearing thin even in Berlin, which is beginning to reconsider the wisdom of attempting to battle ISIS and Assad simultaneously. All too aware of the chaos that the war against Damascus is creating, Chancellor Angela Merkel recently called on Assad to be included in regional negotiations along with Russia and Iran.

Including Assad in an anti-ISIS coalition would infuriate the Saudis, but here opinion is also shifting. The more Americans learn about Saudi Arabia, the less they like it. The kingdom has executed 135 people so far this year, a 50-percent increase over 2014, mostly by public beheading. It has sentenced the liberal blogger Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes and Shi'ite activist Ali Mohammed al-Nimr to death and crucifixion for the crime of participating in anti-government protests when he was just 17.

The U.S. condemns Assad for repressing Arab Spring protests in Syria but says nothing when Riyadh prepares to execute an Arab Spring protest leader in Saudi Arabia, a contradiction lost on no one except a few Washington warmongers.

Public opinion, on the other hand, appears to be slower to come around to Putin's way of thinking on the Crimea. But following the July 11 shoot-out

between neo-Nazis storm troopers and police in western Ukraine and then the Aug. 31 grenade attack in Kiev that killed three policemen and wounded more than 100, it is clear that the ultra-right threat is not a figment of Moscow's imagination, but a growing danger that the Poroshenko government finds difficult to contain.

The more powerful groups like the Right Sector, the Azov battalion and the Svoboda party grow and throw their weight around, the more justified Russian-speakers in the east may seem in fleeing a state in which neo-Nazis are a significant force.

Moreover, xenophobia is spreading not just in the Ukraine, but throughout the entire eastern rim and in portions of western Europe as well where groups like Marine Le Pen's National Front are making rapid strides. The refugee influx marks a melding of two crises as east European xenophobes rage equally at Russians and Muslim refugees.

Since the two crises are coming together, sober thinkers are beginning to realize that they must be addressed jointly if progress is to be made. This means not only a realistic solution in Syria in which Syria, Iran and Iraq take control of the fight against ISIS and Al Qaeda, but also the Ukraine where the Russophone desire for freedom and security should also be taken into account.

"Everyone knows Putin is right," observes the British journalist Simon Jenkins following the Russian president's address Monday to the UN General Assembly, "that the only way forward in Syria, if not to eternal slaughter, is via the established government of Bashar al-Assad and his Lebanese and Iranian allies. That is the realpolitik. That is what pragmatism dictates.

"In the secure west, foreign policy has long been a branch of domestic politics, with added sermonizing. 'What to do,' in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, even Ukraine, has been dictated not by what might work but what looks good. The megaphone is mightier than the brain."

But the result of Americans and Brits "grandstanding at the UN this week seeing who can be ruder about Assad is that Vladimir Putin has gathered ever more cards to his pack."

Indeed. Still, the odds are against Putin. America's ties to the Saudis, to Victoria Nuland's hand-picked government in Kiev, and to the increasingly nationalist regimes in "New Europe" are all too extensive to allow for much leeway.

The neocon foreign-policy establishment in Washington, more powerful than it has been in years, would not tolerate "Putinite" deviationism for an instant, and

neither would America's vast high-tech arms industry, which has grown dependent on sales to the Saudis and other Arab gulf states.

Human Rights Watch director Kenneth Roth, who recently published [a fiery anti-Assad column](#) in *The Guardian*, would have conniptions, while hedge fund operator George Soros would likely dash off another article for *The New York Review of Books* mourning the inability of the EU to "[protect itself from Putin's Russia](#)." *The New York Times* editorial board would have the vapors.

On the other hand, Putin might make headway in detaching Germany, which would no doubt be a game-changer. But its deep links with the U.S. war machine render that unlikely too. The rigidities in the international system may be too much for even the most skillful judo master to flip, which is why the disaster in eastern Europe and the Middle East seems likely to intensify.

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

A Prized Iran-Nuke Myth Unraveling

Once an Official Washington "group think" gets going it's very hard to stop because the mainstream U.S. media will adjust the narrative so as not to debunk what all the Important People "know" to be true, such as shoring up a beloved Iran nuclear myth that is starting to fall apart, as Gareth Porter notes.

By Gareth Porter

For well over three years, heavy doses of propaganda have created a myth about a purported steel cylinder for testing explosives located on a site at Iran's Parchin military testing reservation. According to that storyline, Iran was refusing to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect the site while it sought to hide its past nuclear weapons-related work.

Now Iran has agreed to allow the IAEA to visit the site at Parchin and environmental samples have already been collected at the site. However, the politically charged tale of the bomb test chamber of Parchin is beginning to unravel. IAEA director general Yukiya Amano entered the building in which the explosives chamber had supposedly been located on Monday and announced afterward that he found "no equipment" in the building.

That is surely a major story, in light of how much has been made of the alleged presence of the chamber at that location. But you may have missed that news,

unless you happened to read the story by Jonathan Tirone of Bloomberg Business News, who was the only journalist for a significant news outlet who chose to lead with the story in his coverage of Amano's Monday visit.

The rest of the news media buried that fact far down in their stories, focusing almost entirely on the fact that the Iranians have been allowed to physically gather environmental samples at the site under the gaze of IAEA technicians rather than IAEA inspectors carrying out that function.

The main storyline associated with the purported bomb cylinder since early 2012 has been that Iran has been removing evidence from the site for years in anticipation of an eventual IAEA inspection in order to hide the evidence of past experiments using the purported chamber. But the full story of that mysterious chamber makes it clear that it was highly dubious from the start.

The first description of an explosive chamber at Parchin appeared in an IAEA report published in early November 2011. But less than two weeks after the story of the cylinder was reported in the media, Associated Press reporter George Jahn published a report that an official of an unidentified state had "cited intelligence from his home country, saying it appears that Iran is trying to cover its tracks by sanitizing the site and removing any evidence of nuclear research and development."

The official provided an "intelligence summary" from which Jahn quoted: "Freight trucks, special haulage vehicles and cranes were seen entering and leaving" the site on Nov. 4-5, 2011, it said, and "some equipment and dangerous materials were removed from the site."

Disputed intelligence

The purpose of that language was clearly to suggest that Iran had actually removed the cylinder and the nuclear materials that it had been testing. If true, it would have been very incriminating evidence of Iran's nuclear deception. But there was a problem with that claim. Officials of two other IAEA member states that were obviously following the aerial photography of the Parchin site closely denied that the story being peddled to Jahn by the unnamed state was true.

It was true that there was more activity than normal at the site on those days, they told Jahn, but nothing resembling the activities claimed by the unidentified state's "intelligence summary." One of those two countries denying the story was clearly the United States. Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby told Jahn he had "seen nothing to indicate that those concerns are warranted."

The episode of the AP story begs the obvious question: Why was the state that

could not be named so intent on planting a false story of Iranian removal of the purported cylinder? The obvious purpose of such a story would be to prepare government and public opinion for a possible IAEA visit to the site in the future, and the subsequent discovery that there was nothing incriminating at the site.

That, in turn, indicates that the state in question was the same one that had provided the original story of the explosive cylinder to the IAEA and that it already knew that no cylinder would be found there because the original story had been a fabrication.

Israeli-supplied Documents

The IAEA member state that had provided the information about a purported bomb cylinder was never identified by the IAEA. But IAEA director-general Mohamed El Baradei asserts in his memoirs that in the summer of 2009 Israel turned over to the IAEA a number of intelligence documents purporting to show that Iran had carried out nuclear weapons work “until at least 2007,” most of which consisted of purported Iranian official documents whose authenticity had been questioned by some of the agency’s technical experts.

El Baradei refused to bow to diplomatic pressures from Israel’s allies, coordinated by the head of Israel’s Atomic Energy Commission, to publish a compendium of those documents, including the claim in an intelligence report of the Parchin explosives cylinder. The Israelis and the Obama administration had to wait until Amano succeeded El Baradei and agreed to do exactly that.

The episode of the AP story isn’t the only evidence that the unidentified state had concocted an intelligence document on Parchin that was a complete falsehood. In August 2012, an IAEA report stated that the agency had acquired the satellite imagery available on the Parchin site for the entire period from February 2005 to January 2012.

The report revealed that the imagery showed “virtually no activity at or near the building housing the containment vessel” during that entire period. The imagery clearly suggested that Iran had not been using the site for any sensitive activities, much less the activities suggested by the IAEA in its report, during the seven years, nor had they engaged in any cleanup of the site.

And an earlier episode sheds further light on the issue. In 2004, John Bolton, then President George W. Bush’s Iran policymaker, leaked satellite imagery of sites at Parchin that had features someone believed might be high explosives testing facilities.

After a few months of bullying by Bolton, the IAEA asked to visit Parchin. Iran

not only agreed to an inspection in February 2005 but allowed the IAEA to choose any five sites in any one of the four Parchin quadrants after the inspection team's arrival – and take environmental samples anywhere at the sites. And in November 2005, after El Baradei requested a second inspection, Iran again gave the IAEA the choice of five more sites at which to take samples.

The significance of those two 2005 IAEA inspections is not merely that the environmental samples all came back negative. More important, Iran would never have allowed the IAEA to choose to take environmental samples anywhere it chose at Parchin if it had carried out nuclear-weapons related experiments as claimed later by the unidentified state.

Beginning in spring 2012 and continuing right up to the Vienna round of Iran nuclear negotiations last summer, the IAEA, Western diplomats and David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security generated many dozens of stories about Iran's "stonewalling" the IAEA on Parchin while it sought to remove evidence of its purported nuclear-related testing at the site. Those stories invariably used the term "sanitizing" the same word the Israeli official used in passing on the false story to AP.

Those stories were just as dishonest as the original Israeli story because the IAEA and Western diplomats assigned to it know very well that there is no way to remove all traces of nuclear material from a site. In 2013, Stephan Vogt, the head of the IAEA's environmental sample laboratory, declared in a 2013 interview: "You cannot get rid of them by cleaning, you cannot dilute them to the extent that we will not be able to pick them up."

Strangely, however, even after that interview was published, the Parchin stories continued as if Vogt had not revealed the impossibility of "sanitizing" a site that had held nuclear material.

We are now only a few weeks away from the release of the environmental sampling results at Parchin. It will be amusing to this writer to see how the governments and news media who pushed the Parchin myth manage that story.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This article first appeared at Middle East Eye, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/parchin-myth-begins-unravel-1441311523#sthash.D1zWNM80.dpuf>

Obama's Fateful Syrian Choice

Exclusive: President Obama faces a choice that could define his legacy and the future of the American Republic: He can either work with Russia's President Putin to stabilize Syria or he can opt for a confrontation that could lead to an open-ended war with grave risks of escalation, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There is an obvious course that President Barack Obama could follow if he wants to lessen the crises stemming from the Syrian war and other U.S. "regime change" strategies of the past several decades, but it would require him to admit that recent interventions (including his own) have represented a strategic disaster.

Obama also would have to alter some longstanding alliances including those with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel and correct some of the false narratives that have been established during his administration, such as storylines accusing the Syrian government of using sarin gas on Aug. 21, 2013, and blaming the Russians for everything that's gone wrong in Ukraine.

In retracting false allegations and releasing current U.S. intelligence assessments on those issues, the President would have to repudiate the trendy concept of "strategic communications," an approach that mixes psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. into a "soft power" concoction to use against countries identified as U.S. foes.

"Stratcom" also serves to manage the perceptions of the American people, an assault on the fundamental democratic precept of an informed electorate. Instead of honestly informing the citizenry, the government systematically manipulates us. Obama would have to learn to trust the people with the truth.

Whether Obama recognizes how imperative it is that he make these course corrections, whether he has the political courage to take on entrenched foreign-policy lobbies (especially after the bruising battle over the Iran nuclear agreement), and whether he can overcome his own elitism toward the public are the big questions and there are plenty of reasons to doubt that Obama will do what's necessary. But his failure to act decisively could have devastating consequences for the United States and the world.

In a way, this late-in-his-presidency course correction should be obvious (or at least it would be if there weren't so many layers of "strategic communications" to peel away). It would include embracing Russia's willingness to help stabilize the political-military situation in Syria, rather than the Obama administration

fuming about it and trying to obstruct it.

For instance, Obama could join with Russia in stabilizing Syria by making it clear to putative U.S. "allies" in the Mideast that they will face American wrath if they don't do all that's possible to cut off the terrorists of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda from money, weapons and recruits. That would mean facing down Turkey over its covert support for the Sunni extremists as well as confronting Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Persian Gulf sheikdoms over secret funding and arming of these jihadists.

If Obama made it clear that the United States would take stern action such as inflicting severe financial punishments against any country caught helping these terrorist groups, he could begin shutting down the jihadists' support pipelines. He could also coordinate with the Russians and Iranians in cracking down on the Islamic State and Al Qaeda strongholds inside Syria.

On the political front, Obama could inform Syria's Sunni "moderates" who have been living off American largesse that they must sit down with President Bashar al-Assad's representatives and work out a power-sharing arrangement and make plans for democratic elections after a reasonable level of stability has been restored. Obama would have to ditch his mantra: "Assad must go!"

Given the severity of the crisis as the refugee chaos now spreads into Europe Obama doesn't have the luxury anymore of pandering to the neocons and liberal interventionists. Instead of talking tough, he needs to act realistically.

Putin's Clarity

In a sense, Russian President Vladimir Putin has clarified the situation for President Obama. With Russia stepping up its military support for Assad's regime with the goal of defeating the Islamic State's head-choppers and Al Qaeda's terrorism plotters, Obama's options have narrowed. He can either cooperate with the Russians in a joint campaign against the terrorists or he can risk World War III by taking direct action against Russian forces in pursuit of "regime change" in Damascus.

Though some of Official Washington's neocons and liberal war hawks are eager for the latter insisting that Putin must be taught a lesson about Russia's subservience to American power Obama's sense of caution would be inclined toward the former.

The underlying problem, however, is that Official Washington's foreign policy "elite" has lost any sense of reality. Almost across the board, these "important people" lined up behind President George W. Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq, arguably the worst blunder in the history of U.S. foreign policy.

But virtually no one was held accountable. Indeed, the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks strengthened their grip on the major think tanks, the op-ed pages and the political parties. Instead of dialing back on the “regime change” model, they dialed up more “regime change” schemes.

Although historically the U.S. government like many other imperial powers has engaged in coups and other meddling to oust troublesome foreign leaders, the current chapter on “regime change” strategies can be dated back to the late 1970s and early 1980s with what most American pundits rate a success: the destruction of a secular regime in Afghanistan that was allied with the Soviet Union.

Starting modestly with President Jimmy Carter’s administration and expanding rapidly under President Ronald Reagan, the CIA mounted its most ambitious “covert” operation ever funding, recruiting and arming Islamic extremists to wage a brutal, even barbaric, war in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the operation “succeeded” by forcing a humiliating withdrawal of Soviet troops and driving the Moscow-backed leader Najibullah from power, but the cost turned out to be extraordinary, creating conditions that gave rise to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

In 1996, the Taliban took Kabul, captured Najibullah (whose tortured and castrated body was hung from a light pole), and imposed a fundamentalist form of Islam that denied basic rights to women. The Taliban also gave refuge to Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda band enabling them to plot terror attacks against the West, including the 9/11 assaults on New York and Washington.

In response, President George W. Bush ordered an invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in late 2001 followed by another invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 (though Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11). Those “regime changes” began a cascade of chaos that reached into the Obama administration and to the present.

As Iraq came under the control of its Shiite majority allied with Shiite-ruled Iran, disenfranchised Sunnis organized into increasingly vicious rebel movements, such as “Al Qaeda in Iraq.” To avert a U.S. military defeat, Bush undertook a scheme of buying off Sunni leaders with vast sums of cash to get them to stop killing U.S. soldiers called the “Sunni Awakening” while Bush negotiated a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops.

The payoffs succeeded in buying Bush a “decent interval” for a U.S. pullout that would not look like an outright American defeat, but the huge payments also created a war chest for some of these Sunni leaders to reorganize militarily

after the Shiite-led regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki refused to make significant economic and political concessions.

Obama's Misjudgment

Obama had opposed the Iraq War, but he made the fateful choice after winning the 2008 election to retain many of Bush's national security advisers, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General David Petraeus, and to hire hawkish Democrats, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and National Security Council aide Samantha Power.

Obama's pro-war advisers guided him into a pointless "surge" in Afghanistan in 2009 and a "regime change" war in Libya in 2011 as well as a propaganda campaign to justify another "regime change" in Syria, where U.S. Sunni-led regional "allies" Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf sheikdoms took the lead in a war to oust President Assad, an Alawite, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Syria was allied with Iran and Russia.

At the same time, the Sunni rebel group, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," expanded its operations into Syria and rebranded itself the Islamic State before splitting off from Al Qaeda's central command. Al Qaeda turned to a mix of foreign and Syrian jihadists called Nusra Front, which along with the Islamic State became the most powerful terrorist organization fighting to oust Assad.

When Assad's military struck back against the rebels, the West especially its mainstream media and "humanitarian war" advocates took the side of the rebels who were deemed "moderates" although Islamic extremists dominated almost from the start.

Though Obama joined in the chorus "Assad must go," the President recognized that the notion of recruiting, training and arming a "moderate" rebel force was what he called a "fantasy," but he played along with the demands from the hawks, including Secretary of State Clinton, to "do something."

That clamor rose to a fever pitch in late August 2013 after a mysterious sarin gas attack killed hundreds of Syrian civilians in a Damascus suburb. The State Department, then led by Secretary of State John Kerry, rushed to a judgment blaming the atrocity on Assad's forces and threatening U.S. military retaliation for crossing Obama's "red line" against using chemical weapons.

But the U.S. intelligence community had doubts about the actual perpetrators with significant evidence pointing to a "false flag" provocation carried out by Islamic extremists. At the last minute, President Obama called off the planned airstrikes and worked out a deal with President Putin to get Assad to surrender Syria's chemical weapons arsenal even as Assad continued to deny a role in the

sarin attack.

Still, the U.S. conventional wisdom held fast that Assad had crossed Obama's "red line" and amid more bellicose talk in Washington Obama authorized more schemes for training "moderate" rebels. These sporadic efforts by the CIA to create a "moderate" rebel force failed miserably, with some of the early trainees sharing their weapons and skills with Nusra and the Islamic State, which in 2014 carried its fight back into Iraq, seizing major cities, such as Mosul and Ramadi, and threatening Baghdad.

As the Islamic State racked up stunning victories in Iraq and Syria along with releasing shocking videos showing the decapitation of civilian hostages the neocons and liberal war hawks put on another push for a U.S. military intervention to achieve "regime change" in Syria. But Obama agreed to only attack Islamic State terrorists and to spend \$500 million to train another force of "moderate" Syrian rebels.

Like previous efforts, the new training mission proved an embarrassing failure, producing only about 50 fighters who then were quickly killed or captured by Al Qaeda's Nusra and other jihadist groups, leaving only "four or five" trainees from the program, according to Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, head of the U.S. Central Command which has responsibility for the Middle East.

The Current Crisis

The failure of the training program combined with the destabilizing flow of Mideast refugees into Europe from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and other countries affected by the regional chaos due to "regime changes" has brought new calls across Official Washington for, you guessed it, a U.S.-imposed "regime change" in Syria. The argument goes that "Assad must go" before a solution can be found.

But the greater likelihood is that if the U.S. and its NATO allies join in destroying Assad's military, the result would be Sunni jihadist forces filling the vacuum with the black flag of terrorism fluttering over the ancient city of Damascus.

That could mean the Islamic State chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other "heretics" while Al Qaeda has a new headquarters for plotting terror strikes on the West. Millions of Syrians, now protected by Assad's government, would join the exodus to Europe.

Then, the option for Obama or his successor would be to mount a major invasion and occupation of Syria, a costly and bloody enterprise that would mean the final transformation of the American Republic into an imperial state of

permanent war.

Instead, Obama now has the option to cooperate with Putin to stabilize the Syrian regime and pressure erstwhile U.S. “allies” to cut off Al Qaeda and the Islamic State from money, guns and recruits. Though that might seem like clearly the best of the bad remaining options, it faces extraordinary obstacles from Official Washington.

Already there are howls of protests from the neocons and liberal interventionists who won’t give up their agenda of more “regime change” and their belief that American military power can dictate the outcome of every foreign conflict.

So, whether Obama can muster the courage to face down these bellicose voices and start leveling with the American people about the nuanced realities of the world is the big question ahead.

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](#).

How Russia Can Help in Syria

Despite Official Washington’s annoyance, the Russian involvement in Syria could work in favor of U.S. national interests by adding forces experienced in dealing with Islamic extremists and capable of restoring some stability, a prerequisite for a political settlement, writes ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

Washington has been wrapped in confusion and indecision for years now in trying to sort out just what its real objectives are in Syria. The obsessive and ultimately failed goal of denying Iran influence in the Middle East has notably receded with President Barack Obama’s admirable success in reaching a deal with Iran on the nuclear issue and gradual normalization of Iran’s place in the world.

But while the Israel lobby and its Republican allies failed to block Obama’s

painstaking work in reaching that agreement, they now seem determined to hobble its implementation in any way possible. This is utterly self-defeating: unable to block Iran's re-emergence they seem determined to deny themselves any of the key payoffs of the agreement, the chance to work with Iran selectively on several important common strategic goals: the isolation and defeat of ISIS, a settlement in Syria that denies a jihadi takeover, the rollback of sectarianism as a driving force in the region, a peaceful settlement in Iran's neighbor Afghanistan, and the freeing up of energy/pipeline options across Asia.

But let's address this Syrian issue. There's a new development here, stepped-up Russian involvement, that poses new challenge to the American neocon strategic vision. So here is where Washington needs to sort out what it really wants in Syria.

Is the main goal still to erode Iranian influence in the region by taking out Iran's ally in Damascus? Or does it want to check Russian influence in the Middle East wherever possible in order to maintain America's (fast becoming illusory) dominant influence? These two goals had seemed to weigh more heavily in Washington's calculus than Syrian domestic considerations. In other words, President Bashar al-Assad is a proxy target.

There are two major countries in the world at this point capable of exerting serious influence over Damascus, Russia and Iran. Not surprisingly, they possess that influence precisely because they both enjoy long-time good ties with Damascus; Assad obviously is far more likely to listen to tested allies than heed the plans of enemies dedicated to his overthrow.

The overthrow of Assad seemed a simple task in 2011 as the Arab Spring sparked early uprisings against him. The U.S. readily supported that goal, as did Turkey along with Saudi Arabia and others. As the Assad regime began to demonstrate serious signs of resilience, however, the U.S. and Turkey stepped up support to nominally moderate and secular armed opposition against Damascus, thereby extending the brutal civil war.

That calculus began to change when radical jihadi groups linked either to Al Qaeda or to ISIS (the "Islamic State") began to overshadow moderate opposition forces. As ruthless as Assad had been in crushing domestic opposition, it became clear that any likely successor government would almost surely be dominated by such radical jihadi forces, who simply fight more effectively than the West's preferred moderate and secular groups who never got their act together.

The Russian Card

Enter Russia. Moscow had already intervened swiftly and effectively in 2013 to

head off a planned U.S. airstrike on Damascus to take out chemical weapons by convincing Damascus to freely yield up its chemical weapons; the plan actually succeeded. This event helped overcome at least Obama's earlier reluctance to recognize the potential benefits of Russian influence in the Middle East to positively serve broader western interests in the region as well.

Russia is, of course, no late-comer to the region: Russian tsars long acted as the protector of Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century; the Russians had been diplomatic players in the geopolitical game in the region long before the creation of the Soviet Union.

During the West's Cold War with the Soviet Union the two camps often strategically supported opposite sides of regional conflicts: Moscow supported revolutionary Arab dictators while the West supported pro-western dictators. Russia has had dominant military influence in Syria for over five decades through weapons sales, diplomatic support, and its naval base in Tartus.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russian influence in the area sharply declined for the first time as the new Russia sorted itself out. America then began declaring itself the "world's sole superpower," allegedly free to shape the world strategically as it saw fit.

And the significant neoconservative and liberal interventionist factions in Washington still nourish the same mentality today, predicated on the belief that the U.S. can continue to maintain primacy around the world, economic, military, and diplomatic. In this sense, any acknowledgment of Russian influence in the Middle East (or elsewhere) represents an affront, even "a threat" to U.S. dominance and prestige.

For similar reasons Iran's long-time open challenge against American ability act with impunity in the Middle East has always constituted a deep source of American strategic anger, viscerally surpassing the more Israel-driven nuclear issue.

Today the combination of Russia and Iran (whose interests do not fully coincide either) exert major influence over the weakening Assad regime. If we are truly concerned about ISIS we must recognize that *restoration of a modicum of peace in Syria and Iraq are essential prerequisites* to the ultimate elimination of ISIS that feeds off of the chaos.

Russia appears now to be unilaterally introducing new military forces, stepped up weapons deliveries, and possibly including limited troop numbers into Syria specifically to back the Assad regime's staying power. Washington appears dismayed at this turn of events, and has yet to make up its mind whether it

would rather get rid of Assad or get rid of ISIS. It is folly to think that both goals can be achieved militarily.

Even More Chaos

In my view, the fall of Assad will not bring peace but will instead guarantee deadly massive long-term civil conflict in Syria among contending successors in which radical jihadi forces are likely to predominate, unless the West commits major ground forces to impose and supervise a peace. We've been there once before in the Iraq scenario. A replay of Iraq surely is not what the West wants.

So just how much of a "threat" is an enhanced Russian military presence in Syria? It is simplistic to view this as some zero-sum game in which any Russian gain is an American loss. The West lived with a Soviet naval base in Syria for many decades; meanwhile the U.S. itself has dozens of military bases in the Middle East. (To many observers, these may indeed represent part of the problem.)

Even were Syria to become completely subservient to Russia, U.S. general interests in the region would not seriously suffer (unless one considers maintenance of unchallenged unilateral power to be the main U.S. interest there. I don't.) The West has lived with such a Syrian regime before.

Russia, with its large and restive Muslim population and especially Chechens, is more fearful of jihadi Islam than is even the U.S. If Russia were to end up putting combat troops on the ground against ISIS (unlikely), it would represent a net gain for the West. Russia is far less hated by populations in *the Middle East* than is the U.S. (although Moscow is quite hated by many Muslims of the former Soviet Union.)

Russia is likely to be able to undertake military operations against jihadis from bases within Syria. Indeed, it will certainly shore up Damascus militarily, rather than allowing Syria to collapse into warring jihadi factions.

What Russia will not accept in the Middle East is another unilateral U.S. (or "NATO") *fait accompli* in "regime change" that does not carry full UN support. (China's interests are identical to Russia's in most respects here.)

We are entering a new era in which the U.S. is increasingly no longer able to call the shots in shaping the international order. Surely it is in the (enlightened) self-interest of the U.S. to see an end to the conflict in Syria with all its cross-border sectarian viciousness in Iraq. Russia is probably better positioned than any other world player to exert influence over Assad.

The U.S. should be able to comfortably live even with a Russian-dominated Syria

if it can bring an end to the conflict, especially when Washington meanwhile is allied with virtually every one of Syria's neighbors. (How long Assad himself stays would be subject to negotiation; his personal presence is not essential to 'Alawi power in Syria.)

What can Russia do to the West from its long-term dominant position in Syria? Take Syria's (virtually non-existent) oil? Draw on the wealth of this impoverished country? Increase arms sales to the region (no match for U.S. arms sales)? Threaten Israel? Russia already has close ties with Israel and probably up to a quarter of Israel's population are Russian Jews.

Bottom line: Washington does not have the luxury of playing dog in the manger in "managing" the Middle East, especially after two decades or more of massive and destructive policy failure on virtually all fronts.

It is essential that the U.S. not extend its new Cold War with Russia into the Middle East where shared interests are fairly broad, unless one rejects that very supposition on ideological grounds. The same goes for Iran. We have to start someplace.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle). [This story originally appeared at www.grahamefuller.com]

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.

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*.

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](#).

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).

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.”]
