

Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda

Exclusive: President Obama is tolerating the smuggling of high-tech U.S. weapons to a Syrian rebel coalition led by an Al-Qaeda affiliate, as these Islamists – supported by the Saudis and other U.S. allies – mount a new offensive to topple the secular government in Damascus, as Daniel Lazare explains.

By Daniel Lazare

After years of hemming and hawing, the Obama administration has finally come clean about its goals in Syria. In the battle to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, it is siding with Al Qaeda. This has become evident ever since Jisr Ash-Shughur, a small town in the northeastern part of the country, fell on April 25 to a Saudi and Turkish-backed coalition consisting of the Al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al Sham, and an array of smaller, more “moderate” factions as well.

Al Nusra, which is backed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, is Al Qaeda’s official Syrian affiliate. Ahrar al Sham, which is heavily favored by Qatar, is also linked with Al Qaeda and has also cooperated with ISIS. The other groups, which sport such monikers as the Coastal Division and the Sukur Al Ghab Brigades, are part of the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army and are supposedly as anti-terrorist as they are anti-Assad. Yet they nonetheless “piggybacked” on the offensive, to use The Wall Street Journal’s term, doing everything they could to further the Al-Nusra-led advance.

American clients thus helped Al Qaeda conquer a secular city. But that is not all the U.S. did. It also contributed large numbers of optically-guided TOW missiles that the rebels used to destroy dozens of government tanks and other vehicles, according to videos posted on social media websites. A pro-U.S. rebel commander named Fares Bayoush told The Wall Street Journal that the TOW’s “flipped the balance of power,” giving the Salafists the leverage they needed to dislodge the Syrian army’s heavily dug-in forces and drive them out of the city.

With Syria charging the Turkish military with providing “logistical and fire support,” it appears that the rebels transported the missiles across the Turkish border, located less than eight miles to Jisr Ash-Shughur’s west. Whether the pro-U.S. factions or Al Nusra carried the TOW’s over is unknown. But there is little question as to the ultimate source.

In late 2013, Saudi Arabia went on a buying spree, purchasing more than 15,000 Raytheon anti-tank missiles at a total cost of more than \$1 billion. The purchaser raised eyebrows since TOW’s are mainly useful against tanks and other armored vehicles, a threat that the Saudis have not had to face since the fall

of Saddam Hussein.

But now it all seems clear. Up in arms over supposed Shi'ite advances in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, the arch-Sunnis of Riyadh purchased the missiles with the intention of transferring them to the Syrian Salafists in the hopes of reversing the Shi'ite tide.

U.S. regulations prohibit such third-party transfers, yet so far Washington has not uttered a peep. U.S. policy is also to arm moderate rebels only on the condition that they have nothing to do with Al Qaeda. Yet the response in this regard has been nil as well.

A senior administration official admitted to the *Washington Post* that the White House is "concerned that Al Nusra has taken the lead." But he said that it is aware that "because of the realities of the battlefield, where the more moderate opposition feels compelled to coexist" with terrorist groups, cooperation will occur. He also said the administration is "not blind to the fact that it is to some extent inevitable" that U.S. weapons will wind up in terrorist hands. But all he could say in response is that "it's not something we would refrain from raising with our partners."

The administration, in other words, *knows* that its clients are teaming up with Al Qaeda and *knows* that American weapons are finding their way to the terrorists. Yet all it can say in response is that it *may* raise the topic at some later date. For now, it is thoroughly on board with the Al-Nusra offensive.

It is as if 9/11 never happened. Yet rather than protesting what is in fact a joint U.S.-Al Qaeda assault, the Beltway crowd is either maintaining a discreet silence or loudly hailing Al Nusra's advance as "the best thing that could happen in a Middle East in crisis," to quote Walter Russell Mead in *The American Interest*.

Lina Khatib, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, was equally enthusiastic. "Nusra's pragmatism and ongoing evolution mean that it could become an ally in the fight against the Islamic State," she wrote. "While not everyone likes Nusra's ideology, there is a growing sense in the north of Syria that it is the best alternative on the ground and that ideology is a small price to pay for higher returns."

A growing sense among whom Alawites and Christians who rightly view Al Qaeda as a genocidal threat? A dozen years ago, anyone suggesting an alliance with Al Qaeda in any form would have been a candidate for lynching. But now foreign-policy pundits like Mead and Khatib feel free to broach the topic without fear of contradiction.

Why? America's relationship with Al Qaeda has long been more ambiguous than Washington's bipartisan foreign policy establishment would like ordinary Americans to understand. Not only did the U.S. join with the Saudis in midwifing the modern jihadist movement during the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, but, post-9/11, the Bush administration worked feverishly to cover up ties between Osama bin Laden and its long-time Saudi allies.

Saudi nationals, including members of the bin Laden clan, were allowed to fly out of the country in the days following the attack with at most cursory questioning by the FBI. A crucial 28-page section of the joint congressional report on 9/11 was suppressed while an investigator with the subsequent 9/11 Commission was fired after attempting to look into the question of Saudi funding. [See Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Twelve, 2008), pp. 109-11.]

Bush and Cheney "refus[ed] to declassify anything having to do with Saudi Arabia," former Navy Secretary John F. Lehman, a member of the special commission, later complained. "Anything having to do with the Saudis, for some reason it had this very special sensitivity." [Ibid., 185-86.]

The Bush administration was eager to establish links between bin Laden and Saddam Hussein which were, of course, nonexistent and at the same time desperate to suppress abundant evidence of ties between Al Qaeda and the House of Saud.

While vowing to "smoke out" bin Laden, Bush's real interest was in taking down Saddam. In the end, U.S. policy toward Al Qaeda turned out to be not too different from that of Riyadh: hostility when it dared bomb the homeland, but tolerance and even approval when its activities dovetailed with U.S. foreign-policy goals.

As long as ISIS, Al Qaeda's hyper-brutal spin-off, confined itself to making life miserable for the Baathist regime in Damascus, the U.S. was thus content to look the other way. It was only when Islamic State left the reservation and attacked America's clients in Baghdad that it took umbrage.

But where U.S. officials once felt obliged to keep relations with Al Qaeda under wraps, the accelerating pace of events in the Middle East are now allowing them to speak more openly. Amid plunging oil prices, a hard-line king has taken the throne in Riyadh, an equally tough-minded prime minister has won re-election in Israel, while the U.S. is counting on an unprecedented nuclear deal to improve relations with Iran.

The effect has been to reset the rules, although not quite in ways that people expected. Where the impending deal with Iran soon led to speculation that "the

most fundamental realignment of U.S. foreign policy in a generation" was underway, the reality has been the opposite as Republicans and Democrats rushed to reassure their strategic partners that the old alliance would continue undisturbed.

Thus, Netanyahu's clout on Capitol Hill has only grown while Saudi Arabia and the other Arab gulf states have gained a free hand to do what they like with regard to the Shi'ite "crescent" supposedly threatening them from Sanaa to Beirut.

Little more than a month after his accession, King Salman met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and agreed to stepped-up support for Syria's Sunni rebels, including those with ties to Al Qaeda that had previously been beyond the pale. Instead of boycotting such groups as the U.S. demanded, the new approach was to support Al Nusra and other such forces on the grounds that they were the only ones capable of getting the job done.

The upshot came a couple of weeks later when Al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham announced the formation of a new coalition known as the Army of Conquest (Jaysh al Fateh) that would include a number of smaller Islamist groups as well. In late March, the new coalition took Idlib, about 30 miles northeast of Jisr Ash-Shughur. In late April, armed with U.S.-made TOW's, it took Jisr Ash-Shughur.

Anxious to shore up relations with the Saudis in view of the impending deal with Iran, the Obama administration did not dare object. The same logic prevailed when Saudi Arabia launched its air assault on Yemen on March 25, just as the negotiations with Iran were moving into high gear. If Riyadh felt it had no choice but to subject Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, to nightly bombing raids, then the U.S. would not object either.

As a Defense Department official observed, it's "important that the Saudis know that we have an arm around their shoulder." More than a thousand Yemenis have died as a consequence, some 300,000 have been forced to flee their homes, while Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has taken advantage of the chaos to seize control of the port of Al Mukalla in the country's east and much of surrounding Hadramawt province as well.

But where the U.S. had once used drones to harry Al Qaeda regardless of the collateral damage to the surrounding civilian population, its attitude now seems distinctly blasé. If the Saudis don't care about Al Qaeda's new foothold, then the U.S. doesn't care either.

As such policies drive Syria and Yemen to collapse and generate a tidal wave of refugees, the only consolation is that the Saudis may be cracking under the

strain as well. With its mountainous terrain and deep tribal divisions, Yemen has long been a study in controlled chaos. But Riyadh has seemingly done everything in its power to make a bad situation worse.

As U.S. diplomats noted, the Houthi insurgency now tearing the country apart did not start on its own. To the contrary, it was a surge of Saudi-financed Wahhabist propaganda that played into the worst fears of Yemen's Shi'ite minority and put the Houthis on the warpath. As secret State Department cables noted in 2009, Saudi-backed Salafism "has spread rapidly in Yemen over the last two decades," causing Houthis to feel "increasingly threatened."

Where it was once said of the northern province of Sa'ada that it was "so Shi'a that even the stone is Shi'a," residents felt besieged by a growing profusion of Sunni-Salafist schools and mosques bankrolled by Saudi Arabia's cash-rich petro-sheiks.

Growing Saudi sectarianism fueled Houthi sectarianism and pushed the country into all-out civil war. U.S. diplomats also assailed the Saudis for attempting to impose a military solution on the Houthis rather than seeking a political settlement.

As U.S. Ambassador Stephen Seche put it in November 2009, Riyadh was foisting so much military aid on Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh now, ironically, a Houthi ally that it was inevitable that the guns would "find their way into Yemen's thriving grey arms market. From there, it is anyone's guess as to where the weapons will surface, potentially even in the hands of extremist groups bent on attacking Western interests in Yemen and ironically, Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries in the Gulf."

"We urge the [State] Department," Seche went on, "to convey to these 'friends of Yemen' that they are undermining their goal of a stable and secure Yemen by providing large amounts of money and military assistance." It was excellent advice, but unfortunately it fell on deaf ears. Instead of less militarization, the Saudis opted for more with predictably disastrous consequences.

Nonetheless, there are signs that the Saudis may at last have bitten off more than they can chew. Riyadh, for example, initially announced that Pakistan would be among the ten Sunni-majority states participating in the anti-Houthi operation. But when Riyadh specified that Shi'ite soldiers would not be welcome, Islamabad balked.

With Shi'ites comprising as much as 20 percent of the Pakistani population, the requirement would have inflamed religious tensions and pushed the country closer

to Lebanese-style civil war. While doing little to slow the Houthi advance, the nightly bombing raids have meanwhile highlighted the kingdom's inability to follow up with a land offensive. While strong in the air, the kingdom turns out to be a paper tiger where it counts, i.e. on the ground.

Indeed, Salman's recent political purge, the most sweeping in decades, may be a sign that dissatisfaction is growing in royal ranks since Prince Muqrin Bin Abdul Aziz, the chief victim, was known as a critic of the war. The more military intervention war turns into a dead end, the more dissent will intensify and if there's one thing Saudi Arabia's absolute autocracy can't tolerate, it's political dissent.

Finally, there is the recent arrest of 93 alleged ISIS members on charges of plotting attacks on the U.S. Embassy and other targets. If the charges are true always a big "if" when Saudi Arabia is concerned then it is a sign that despite spending billions for a high-tech barrier along its northern border, the kingdom is still unable to keep ISIS out.

No matter how much it cozies up to the good Al Qaeda, it still faces trouble with the bad. With Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi promising to exterminate the kingdom's own 15-percent Shi'ite minority if he ever takes power, it is a sign of how religious extremism is thriving in an atmosphere of heated sectarianism that the House of Saud has done so much to promote.

The result is a four-way collision that has been years in the making. Struggling to hold his rickety Middle Eastern empire together while making a deal with Iran, Obama is unable to say no to the Saudi steamroller. But since he can't say no to the Saudis, he can't say no to the Saudis' partner, Al Qaeda. The U.S. finds itself back in bed with terrorists it had promised to avoid.

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

How Saudi-Israel Alliance Helps Al-Qaeda

Neither the U.S. political system nor the mainstream media can come to grips with the new reality in the Middle East as the Saudi-Israeli alliance effectively sides with Al-Qaeda-connected jihadists and seeks to entangle the U.S. government on the Sunni side of an ancient conflict with Shiites, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

At least since 2001, a prime goal of the U.S. national interest has been reducing the influence and power of “terrorist” groups which have shown themselves willing and capable of attacking U.S. territory and nationals. Among these groups are al-Qaeda and its derivatives, al-Nusra, and ISIS (the so-called Islamic State).

How to properly achieve this goal is open to debate (for instance, the use of drones to kill their leaders almost certainly makes the U.S. more enemies than it eliminates), but one sure way of *not* addressing this national interest is adopting policies that benefit the very groups that are your sworn foes, or turning a blind eye to alleged “allies” who aid them.

This might sound like common sense, however in practice U.S. government’s policies in the region have for decades been counterproductive and plagued by special interest intervention. In other words, U.S. politicians and bureaucrats have pushed policies that have actually aided America’s foes.

Before 2001, the U.S. had long pursued policies that supported a range of unpopular Middle East dictatorships. The spectrum ran from the Saudi Monarchy with its fanatical fundamentalist worldview to more secular dictatorships such as the one in Egypt. This practice identified us in the popular mind with bad people and bad governments and made us the enemy of those seeking liberty and democracy.

In addition, we supported the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians and that made us unpopular with, among others, almost every Muslim on the planet. None of this was in the America’s genuine national interest but it certainly was in the interest of special interests such as Zionists, oil companies and arms manufacturers.

That there was (and remains) a difference between special interests and national interests should have been crystal clear when the pursuit of lobby-driven policies earned the U.S. the 9/11 attacks. One can make a disgusted face and assert that this assessment “blames the victim,” but that is just burying one’s head in the sand. The outrages of 9/11 were not in response to Islamic teachings, they were in response to Washington’s awful policy choices.

Then, instead of responding to those attacks with a policy review, U.S. leaders quickly compounded the problem by adopting a policy of regime change which resulted in the invasion of Iraq – a country that had nothing to do with bringing down the World Trade Center towers, but was on the Israeli and neoconservative hit list. Washington’s attack on Iraq created a gigantic power

vacuum in the heartland of the Middle East, which, in turn, allowed the growth of such present-day threats as ISIS and al-Nusra.

These groups are extremist in character and are inspired by the conquests of the 18th-century religious fanatic Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of the religious sect adhered to by the Saudis. That is why ISIS and others like it are going after anyone who is not a practitioner of the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam – including the Syrians and their government, the Iraqi Shiites and their government, the Kurds, and a good number of the Lebanese.

There is just one added piece of information that readers should know. The activities of these very bloody religious dogmatists are now being aided by an alliance of Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Saudis are giving these fanatics lots of money because they are religiously kindred and can be used as vehicles for spreading Wahhabi dogma throughout the Middle East while weakening (usually by mass slaughter) non-Sunni populations. Israel (the nation that, according to Prime Minister Netanyahu, is leading the fight against al-Qaeda in the Middle East) is aiding these same groups because it sees them as preferable to the Assad government in Syria, Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and the Shiite governments of Iraq and Iran.

This is a big mistake on the part of the Israelis, who are essentially inviting Wahhabi radicals to be their northern neighbor, but no one has ever accused the Zionists of clear-sighted, long-range planning.

Changing Alliances

As a consequence of this situation, there has been a major shift of alliances that has stunned and paralyzed the Obama administration. The enemy has certainly remained the same: the fanatics whose lineage can be traced back to Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks of 2001. However, who is now allied with these “bad guys” and who is allied against them has radically altered. For anyone with the ability to look at the situation objectively, that change should have profound implications for U.S. foreign policy.

If the enemy is real and persistent, then those opposing it should warrant U.S. assistance. Who are these enemies of America’s enemies? They are now the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, whose government is under attack by al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda-like forces; Hezbollah, which has come to the aid of al-Assad; the Shiite government of Iraq, which, along with the Kurds, is under attack by ISIS; and the Shiite government of Iran, which has come to the aid of Iraq.

It is doubtful that many Americans know of this line-up of forces because they have often been misled by their own media. For instance, a recent CNN program

entitled "Who Is Doing What in the Coalition Battle Against ISIS" lists such countries as Australia, Canada and even Belgium and Iceland but never mentions Syria, Iraq (except for the Kurds) or Iran. Either the folks at CNN are being disingenuous or they are living on another planet.

Likewise, those now aiding America's enemies should not warrant the kind of relationship that has bound Washington to them in the past. Who are these countries who are now friends of America's enemies? They are Saudi Arabia, Israel and most of the Gulf Arabs.

But how would Americans know this to be the case? Saudi Arabia, whose citizens are major funders of ISIS, is listed by CNN as fighting against the Islamic State. How about Israel's tawdry role in this affair? Except for a few isolated stories in a limited number of newspapers you won't find any attention being paid to the growing connection between the Zionist state and these enemies of the U.S.

Are there people in the U.S. government who understand this new turn of events? Of course there are. However, my guess is that most of them reside in the middle echelons of the State Department, where they have little or no impact on policy.

How about those in the upper echelons of the foreign policy bureaucracy or the various foreign policy committees of the Congress? No enlightenment there. Traditionally these people can't think their way out of the paper bag put over their heads by special interests.

What this means is that the chance that U.S. foreign policy will adjust to this new and important situation in the Middle East is low. Those in Congress who are financially or ideologically tied to the Zionists, as well as neoconservative dogmatists, are too set in their ways to understand that the landscape has changed. President Obama and some in his administration may well be aware of the situation but are, apparently, immobilized by the political risks of actually acting on their knowledge what is really in the national interest.

Ideally, the U.S. government should alter policy to fit reality. So, what would a new, more realistic policy look like? Well, we have to keep in mind that no one except the Zionists, the neocons and some of the really unintelligent Republican candidates for president wants to send in more American troops to fight in the Middle East.

Given that fact, the best policy is to materially support those who are fighting al-Qaeda and its derivatives, and diplomatically pressure those aiding the "bad guys" to stop doing so.

That means supporting the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. But it

is a dictatorship! Well, that should be no problem for Washington, which already supports dictatorships much worse than the one in Syria. But the al-Assad government is hostile to Israel! So what? By aiding groups like al-Nusra, the Israelis have forfeited any claim on American sympathy (unless, of course, you're a U.S. politician who has been captured by the Zionist lobby).

That said, I suggest the U.S. begin the process of support by giving Damascus surface-to-air missiles so they can shoot down the Israeli warplanes that are now giving air support to al-Qaeda forces in Syria.

Washington should also support the military effort of Iran, Hezbollah and the Kurds to fight al-Nusra and ISIS. After all we are already aiding the Iraqi government in the exact same endeavor. It makes no strategic sense to restrict assistance to just Baghdad.

In Washington, however, the folks in Congress and the political parties with input to foreign policy, as well as the political appointees at the head of the foreign policy bureaucracy, are out of the reality-loop. The only thing those people know of the Middle East is what they read in APAC-provided briefing books.

One of the lessons of history is that both people and nations who fail to adapt to new circumstances are doomed to eventually decline. So, America, if the shoe fits..

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*.

The Day After Damascus Falls

Exclusive: The Saudi-Israeli alliance has gone on the offensive, ramping up a "regime change" war in Syria and, in effect, promoting a military victory for Al-Qaeda or its spinoff, the Islamic State. But the consequences of that victory could toll the final bell for the American Republic, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If Syrian President Bashar al-Assad meets the same fate as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi or Iraq's Saddam Hussein, much of Official Washington would rush out to some chic watering hole to celebrate one more "bad guy" down, one more "regime

change” notch on the belt. But the day after Damascus falls could mark the beginning of the end for the American Republic.

As Syria would descend into even bloodier chaos with an Al-Qaeda affiliate or its more violent spin-off, the Islamic State, the only real powers left the first instinct of American politicians and pundits would be to cast blame, most likely at President Barack Obama for not having intervened more aggressively earlier.

A favorite myth of Official Washington is that Syrian “moderates” would have prevailed if only Obama had bombed the Syrian military and provided sophisticated weapons to the rebels.

Though no such “moderate” rebel movement ever existed at least not in any significant numbers that reality is ignored by all the “smart people” of Washington. It is simply too good a talking point to surrender. The truth is that Obama was right when he told New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman in August 2014 that the notion of a “moderate” rebel force that could achieve much was “always a fantasy.”

As much fun as the “who lost Syria” finger-pointing would be, it would soon give way to the horror of what would likely unfold in Syria with either Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front or the spin-off Islamic State in charge or possibly a coalition of the two with Al-Qaeda using its new base to plot terror attacks on the West while the Islamic State engaged in its favorite pastime, those YouTube decapitations of infidels Alawites, Shiites, Christians, even some descendants of the survivors from Turkey’s Armenian genocide a century ago who fled to Syria for safety.

Such a spectacle would be hard for the world to watch and there would be demands on President Obama or his successor to “do something.” But realistic options would be few, with a shattered and scattered Syrian army no longer a viable force capable of driving the terrorists from power.

The remaining option would be to send in the American military, perhaps with some European allies, to try to dislodge Al-Qaeda and/or the Islamic State. But the prospects for success would be slim. The goal of conquering Syria and possibly re-conquering much of Iraq as well would be costly, bloody and almost certainly futile.

The further diversion of resources and manpower from America’s domestic needs also would fuel the growing social discontent in major U.S. cities, like what is now playing out in Baltimore where disaffected African-American communities are rising up in anger against poverty and the police brutality that goes with it. A

new war in the Middle East would accelerate America's descent into bankruptcy and a dystopian police state.

The last embers of the American Republic would fade. In its place would be endless war and a single-minded devotion to security. The National Security Agency already has in place the surveillance capabilities to ensure that any civil resistance could be thwarted.

Can This Fate Be Avoided?

But is there a way to avoid this grim fate? Is there a way to wind this scenario back to some point before this outcome becomes inevitable? Can the U.S. political/media system as corrupt and cavalier as it is find a way to avert such a devastating foreign policy disaster?

To do so would require Official Washington to throw off old dependencies, such as its obeisance to the Israel Lobby, and old habits, such as its reliance on manipulative PR to control the American people, patterns deeply engrained in the political process.

At least since the Reagan administration with its "kick the Vietnam Syndrome" fascination via "public diplomacy" and "perception management" the tendency has been to designate some foreign leader as the latest new villain and then whip up public hysteria in support of a "regime change." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Victory of Perception Management.](#)"]

In the 1980s, we saw the use of these "black hat/white hat" exaggerations in Nicaragua, where President Ronald Reagan deemed President Daniel Ortega "the dictator in designer glasses" as Reagan's propagandists depicted Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua as a "totalitarian dungeon" and the CIA-trained Contra "freedom fighters" the "moral equal of the Founding Fathers."

And, since Ortega and the Sandinistas were surely not the embodiment of all virtue, it was hard to put Reagan's black-and-white depiction into the proper shades of gray. To make the effort opened you to charges of being a "Sandinista apologist." Similarly, any negative news about the Contras such as their tendencies to rape, murder, torture and smuggle drugs was sternly suppressed with offending U.S. journalists targeted for career retaliation.

The pattern set by Reagan around Nicaragua and other Central American conflicts became the blueprint for how to carry out these post-Vietnam War propaganda operations. Afterwards came Panama's "madman" Manuel Noriega in 1989 and Iraq's "worse than Hitler" Saddam Hussein in 1990-91. Each American war was given its own villainous lead actor.

In 2002-03, Hussein was brought back to reprise his “worse-than-Hitler” role in a post-9/11 sequel. His new evil-doing involved sharing nuclear weapons and other WMD with Al-Qaeda so the terror group could inflict even worse havoc on the innocent United States. Anyone who questioned Official Washington’s WMD “group think” was dismissed as a “Saddam apologist.”

Amid this enforced consensus, there was great joy when the U.S.-led invasion overthrew Hussein’s government and captured him. “We got him,” U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer exulted when Hussein was pulled from a “spider hole” and was soon heading to the gallows.

However, some of the triumphal excitement wore off when the U.S. occupation forces failed to discover the promised caches of WMD. Hussein’s ouster also didn’t produce the sunny new day that America’s neocons had promised for Iraq and the Middle East. Instead, Al-Qaeda, which had not existed under Hussein’s secular regime, found fertile soil to plant its “Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” a radical Sunni movement which pioneered a particularly graphic form of terrorist violence.

That brutality, often directed at Shiites, was met with brutality in kind from Iraq’s new Shiite leadership, touching off a sectarian civil war. Meanwhile, the war against the U.S. occupation turned into a messy struggle between America’s high-tech military and Iraq’s low-tech resistance.

Lessons Unlearned

What Americans should have learned from Iraq was that just because the neocons and their liberal-interventionist friends identify a foreign “bad guy” and then exaggerate his faults doesn’t mean that his violent removal is the best idea. It might actually lead to something worse. There is wisdom in the doctor’s oath, “first, do no harm,” and there’s truth in the old warning that before you tear down a wall, you should ask why someone built it in the first place.

However, in the propaganda world of Official Washington, a different lesson was learned: that it is easy to create designated villains and no one of importance will dare challenge the wisdom of removing that villain through another “regime change.”

Instead of the neocons and their liberal helpers being held accountable and removed from the corridors of power, they entrenched themselves more deeply inside the U.S. government, mainstream media and big-name think tanks. They also found new allies among the self-righteous “human rights” community espousing the theory of “responsibility to protect” or “R2P.”

Despite President Obama’s election partly driven by the American people’s

revulsion over the neocon excesses during President George W. Bush's administration there was no real purge of the neocons and their accomplices. Indeed, Obama kept in place Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the neocons' beloved Gen. David Petraeus while installing neocon-lite Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Around Obama at the White House were prominent R2Pers such as Samantha Power.

So, although Obama may have personally favored a more realist-driven foreign policy that would deal with the world as it is, not as one might dream it to be, he never took control of his own administration, passively accepting the rise of a new generation of interventionists who continued depicting designated foreign villains as evil and rejecting any discouraging word that "regime change" might actually unleash even worse evil.

In 2011, the R2Pers, as the neocons' junior partners, largely initiated the U.S.-orchestrated "regime change" in Libya, which starred Muammar Gaddafi in a returning role as "the world's most dangerous man." All the old terror charges against him were resurrected, including some like the Pam Am 103 bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 that he very likely didn't do. But, again, no one wanted to quibble because that would make you a "Gaddafi apologist."

So, to the gleeful delight of Secretary of State Clinton, Gaddafi was overthrown, captured, beaten, sodomized with a knife, and then murdered. Clinton made no effort to conceal her glee. "We came, we saw, he died," she joked at the news of his murder (although it was not clear that she knew all the grisly details at the time).

But Gaddafi's demise did not bring Nirvana to Libya. Indeed, Gaddafi's warning about the need to attack Islamic terrorists operating in eastern Libya his military offensive that led to the R2P demand that Obama intervene militarily to stop Gaddafi proved to be prophetic.

Extremists grabbed control of much of Libya. They overran the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, killing the U.S. ambassador and three other U.S. diplomatic personnel. A civil war has now spread anarchy and mayhem across Libya and nearby countries.

Libya also now has its own branch of the Islamic State, which videotaped its beheadings of Coptic Christians along a beach on the Mediterranean Sea, a sickening sign of what could be expected after a possible Syrian "regime change" next. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The US Hand in Libya's Tragedy.](#)"]

On to Ukraine

While U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and other R2Pers took the lead in provoking the Libyan fiasco, neocon holdovers demonstrated their own

“regime change” skills by turning a pedestrian political dispute in Ukraine about how fast to build new economic ties to Europe while maintaining old ones with Russia into not only a civil war in Ukraine but a revival of the Cold War between the United States and Russia.

In the Ukraine case, the neocons made elected President Viktor Yanukovich wear the black hat with Russian President Vladimir Putin fitted for even a bigger black hat. So, as Yanukovich and Putin were scripted as the new “bad guys,” the anti-Yanukovich protesters and rioters at the Maidan square were made into the white-hatted “good guys.”

Much as with the Sandinistas and the Contras in the 1980s, this dichotomy required assigning all evil to Yanukovich and Putin while absolving the Maidan crowd of all sins, including the key role played by neo-Nazi militias in both the Feb. 22, 2014 coup and the subsequent civil war. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.”](#)]

As the Ukraine crisis has played out, Official Washington and the mainstream U.S. news media have consistently placed all blame for the violence on Yanukovich lodging the dubious charge that he had snipers kill both police and protesters on Feb. 20, 2014 or on Putin fingering him for the still-unsolved case of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 shoot-down on July 17, 2014.

Evidence that suggests that right-wing Ukrainian elements were responsible for those pivotal events is sloughed off with anyone daring to dispute the conventional wisdom deemed a “Putin apologist.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“How Ukraine Commemorates the Holocaust.”](#)]

Meanwhile, starting in 2011, the neocons and the R2Pers were both active in pushing for the overthrow of Syria’s President Assad, who like all the other “bad guys” has been made into a one-dimensional villain brutalizing innocent “moderates” who stand for all that is good and right in the world.

The fact that the anti-Assad opposition has always included Sunni extremists and terrorists drawing support from Saudi Arabia and other authoritarian Sunni Persian Gulf states is another inconvenient truth that usually gets kept out of the mainstream narrative.

Though it’s surely true that both sides in the Syrian civil war have engaged in atrocities, the neocon-R2P storyline for much of the civil war was to consistently blame Assad and to conveniently absolve the rebels. Thus, on Aug. 21, 2013, when a mysterious sarin gas attack killed several hundred people in a Damascus suburb, the rush to judgment blamed Assad’s forces, despite logic and evidence that it was more likely a provocation by rebel extremists. [See

Consortiumnews.com's "A Fact-Resistant 'Group Think' on Syria."]

Though it was less clear in August 2013, it soon became obvious that the most effective rebel fighters were Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State, which had evolved from the hyper-violent "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" into the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" before adopting the name, "Islamic State." By September 2013, many of the U.S.-armed and CIA-trained fighters of the Free Syrian Army had thrown in their lot with either Nusra Front or Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Syrian Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda."]

No Self-Criticism

But the opinion leaders of Official Washington are not exactly self-critical when they misread a foreign crisis. To explain why the beloved Syrian "moderates" joined forces with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, the neocons and the R2Pers blamed Obama for not intervening militarily earlier to achieve "regime change" against Assad.

In other words, no lessons were learned from the experiences in Iraq and Libya that "regime change" is a dangerous strategy that fails to take into account the complexities of the countries where the United States decides to overthrow governments.

The same unlearned lesson should have applied to Ukraine, a strategically important nation to Russia and one in which much of the population is ethnic Russian. But there neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland brushed aside the possibility of a costly showdown with Russia a conflict that could potentially evolve into a nuclear conflagration in order to pursue the "regime change" model.

While Ukraine today remains engulfed in chaos the same as "regime change" experiments Iraq and Libya the most potentially catastrophic "regime change" could come in Syria. The neocons and the R2Pers as well as the mainstream U.S. media remain set on ousting Assad, a goal also shared by Israel, Saudi Arabia and other hard-line Sunni states.

For his part, President Obama seems incapable of making the tough decisions that would avert a Syrian victory by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. That's because to help salvage the Assad regime as the preferable alternative to transforming Syria into the bedlam of "terror central" would require cooperating with Iran and Russia, Assad's two most important backers.

That, in turn, would infuriate the neocons, the R2Pers and the mainstream media. Obama would face a rebellion across Official Washington, where the debating points regarding "who lost Syria" are more valuable than taking realistic

actions to protect vital American interests.

Obama would also have to face down both Saudi Arabia and Israel, something he does not seem capable of doing, especially as he tries to salvage an international agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program to peaceful purposes only when Saudi Arabia and Israel want to enlist the U.S. military in another "regime change" war in Iran.

Indeed, the recent decision by the Saudi-Israeli alliance to go on the offensive against what it deems Iranian "proxies" is possibly the major reason why the United States is incapable of taking action to avert what may be an impending Al-Qaeda/Islamic State victory in Syria. Between Saudi Arabia's power over finance and energy and Israel's political and media clout, these "strange-bedfellow" allies wield enormous influence over Official Washington. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

This alliance is now entangling the United States in ancient Sunni-Shiite rivalries dating back to the Seventh Century. Saudi Arabia, Israel and their many U.S. backers are gluing black hats on Shiite-ruled Iran and its allies while adjusting white hats on the Saudi royals and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has unleashed the potent Israel Lobby to get Official Washington in line.

Israel also has intensified its airstrikes inside Syria, bombing targets associated with Lebanon's Hezbollah militia which is supporting the Assad regime. Israel rationalizes these attacks as designed to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining sophisticated weaponry but the practical effect is to weaken the forces battling Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey and some Persian Gulf states, has stepped up support for the Sunni Islamists battling Assad's army, thus explaining the recent surge of new recruits and improved fighting capabilities of the rebels.

Yemen's Suffering

In another front in this Sunni-Shiite regional war, Saudi Arabia deploying sophisticated American warplanes continues to pummel neighboring Yemen where Houthi rebels, belonging to a Shiite offshoot, have gained control of the capital Sanaa and other major cities.

On Tuesday, Saudi jets [bombed](#) Sanaa's airport to prevent an Iranian humanitarian aid flight from landing, but the destruction also made the runway unusable for other supplies desperately needed by the Yemeni people. While the Saudis prevented this aid from the air, the U.S. Navy has mounted what amounts to a

blockade at sea, turning back nine Iranian ships last weekend because of unconfirmed suspicions that weapons might be hidden in the food and medicine.

The combination of these interdictions is creating a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the poorest nation in the Middle East. The U.S. Navy, which likes to call itself “a global force for good,” has, in effect, been drawn into a strategy of starving the Yemeni people into submission as just more collateral damage in the Saudi war against Iranian influence.

Another consequence of the Saudi air campaign has been to boost “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” which has exploited the Saudi targeting of Houthi forces to seize more territory in Yemen’s east.

Yet, as tragic as the Yemeni situation is becoming, the more consequential crisis is emerging in Syria, where some analysts are seeing signs of a possible collapse of the Assad regime, a chief goal of the Saudi-Israeli alliance. Senior Israelis have been saying since 2013 that they would prefer a victory by Al-Qaeda over a victory by Assad.

For instance, in September 2013, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post in an interview: “The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc. We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the “bad guys” were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In June 2014, Oren expanded on this thinking at an Aspen Institute conference, extending Israel’s preference to include even the hyper-brutal Islamic State. “From Israel’s perspective, if there’s got to be an evil that’s got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail,” Oren said.

During Netanyahu’s March 3, 2015 speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, he also downplayed the danger from the Islamic State with its “butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube” compared to Iran, which he accused of “gobbling up the nations” of the Middle East. However, Iran has not gobbled up any nations in the Middle East. It has not invaded any country for centuries. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Inventing a Record of Iranian Aggression.”]

Yet, while the Saudi-Israeli alarums about Iran may border on the hysterical, the alliance’s combined influence over Official Washington cannot be overstated. Thus, as absurd and outrageous as many of the claims are, they are not only taken seriously, they are treated as gospel. Anyone who points to the reality

immediately becomes an “Iranian apologist.”

But the power of the Saudi-Israeli alliance is not simply a political curiosity or an obstacle to sensible policies. As it creates the conditions for an Al-Qaeda/Islamic State victory in Syria and the possible reintroduction of the U.S. military into the middle of the Middle East the Saudi-Israeli alliance has become an existential threat to the survival of the American Republic.

As the nation’s first presidents wisely recognized, there are grave dangers to a republic when it entangles itself in foreign conflicts. It’s almost always wiser to seek out realistic albeit imperfect political solutions or at least to evaluate what the negative ramifications of the military option might be before undertaking it. Otherwise, as the early presidents realized, if the country plunges into one costly conflict after another, it becomes a martial state, not a democratic republic.

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](#).

Syria’s Nightmarish Narrative

Exclusive: With military and political help from Saudi Arabia and Israel, the nightmare scenario of an Al-Qaeda and/or Islamic State victory in Syria may be coming true, as the army of the more secular Syrian government retreats and as President Obama seems frozen by indecision, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The [Saudi-Israeli alliance](#), in league with other hard-line Sunni countries, is helping Al-Qaeda affiliates advance toward gaining either victory or at least safe havens in Syria and Yemen, highlighting unresolved contradictions in President Barack Obama’s policies in the Middle East.

Fueled by a surge of support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and with Israel striking at Syrian government allies Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda’s hyper-brutal spinoff, the Islamic State, are making major advances in Syria with some analysts now predicting the likely collapse of the relatively secular



government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have made clear over the past few years that they regard the overthrow of the Iranian-backed Assad government as a geopolitical priority even if it results in a victory by Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. But Obama, who has been unwilling or unable to rein in the Saudi-Israeli alliance, would then have to decide what to do with Islamic terrorists dominating a major Mideast nation.

Some of these Sunni radicals have shown that they will move aggressively toward slaughtering minority groups that they consider infidels, including Christians, Alawites and Shiites. The terrorists could leave the streets of major Syrian cities running red with blood and give Al-Qaeda a solid platform from which to launch terrorist attacks against the West.

How Obama or his successor might respond to that is uncertain but it would be difficult for any American president to sit back and do nothing. Yet, dispatching another U.S. military expeditionary force to Syria to dislodge Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State from Damascus and across Syria would likely be a fool's errand resulting in massive loss of life, costing trillions of dollars and promising little success.

Meanwhile, the neocon-dominated mainstream U.S. news media is already pushing the narrative that Obama's failure was that he didn't intervene earlier to overthrow the Assad regime so some "moderate" rebels could have taken power.

But the existence of a significant "moderate" rebel army was always a fiction. As Obama noted in a frank [interview](#) with New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman in August 2014, the notion that arming the rebels would have made a difference has "always been a fantasy."

Obama explained: "This 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, that was never in the cards."

Obama added that his administration had trouble finding, training and arming enough secular Syrian rebels to make a difference: "There's not as much capacity as you would hope."

Indeed, much of the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army threw in its lot and their U.S.-supplied weapons with Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front or the Islamic State in 2013. After that, Obama's only realistic choice was to strike a pragmatic political agreement with Assad and cooperate with Iran and Russia in reclaiming territory from Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Getting Rid of Assad

But that option proved politically impossible because the Israel Lobby and American neocons continued to press for Assad's overthrow. They were aided by Obama's unwillingness to release U.S. intelligence that undercut some of the major anti-Assad themes dominating the mainstream U.S. media. For instance, Obama could have revealed doubts within the U.S. intelligence community that Assad's regime was responsible for the infamous sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Blaming Assad for the sarin attack, which killed hundreds of civilians, was a valuable part of the neocon narrative that prevented any détente with Assad. Yet, even as more evidence emerged that the attack was likely a provocation committed by rebel extremists, Obama balked at updating the initial rush to judgment nine days after the event fingering Assad's forces.

As recently as this month, the Obama administration was still handing out those initial accusations to CBS' "60 Minutes" and other mainstream media outlets, which simply regurgitate the outdated intelligence data rather than examine the newer evidence that points to a rebel "false-flag" operation designed to draw the U.S. military into the Syrian civil war on the rebel side. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["A Fact-Resistant 'Group Think' on Syria."](#)]

Though Obama pulled back in 2013 from bombing the Syrian military, which could have opened the gates of Damascus to Al-Qaeda and/or the Islamic State, the President hasn't been willing to override the "regime change" desires of his State Department, which remains influenced by neocons and their sidekicks, the

liberal interventionists.

Now, despite the growing risk of an Al-Qaeda or Islamic State victory in Syria, Obama seems frozen by indecision over what to do, hemmed in by the Israel Lobby, the oil-rich Saudis and neocon politicians and opinion-leaders in Official Washington.

But the dangers of an Islamic terror victory in Syria grow by the day. In an article entitled "Rebel resurgence puts Syrian regime in peril," the Washington Post's Liz Sly reported on Monday that "A surge of rebel gains in Syria is overturning long-held assumptions about the durability of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, which now appears in greater peril than at any time in the past three years.

"The capture Saturday of the town of Jisr al-Shughour in northern Idlib province was just the latest in a string of battlefield victories by rebel forces, which have made significant advances in both the north and the south of the country.

"The battlefield shifts come at a time when the Obama administration has set aside the crisis in Syria to focus on its chief priorities: defeating the Islamic State militant group in Iraq and concluding a nuclear deal with Iran. Yet the pace of events in Syria may force the United States to refocus on the unresolved war, which remains at the heart of the turmoil engulfing the Middle East, analysts say.

"Iran backs Assad, Saudi Arabia backs the rebels, and a shift in the balance of power in Syria could have profound repercussions for the conflicts in Iraq and Yemen. 'We're seeing a game changer right now in Syria,' said Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist. 'I think we are going to see an end to the Assad regime, and we have to think now about what will happen the day after, because the day after is near.'

"The revival of rebel fortunes is attributed to a large degree to the recent rapprochement between a newly assertive Saudi Arabia and its erstwhile rivals for influence over the rebels, Turkey and Qatar.

"Since inheriting the throne in January, Saudi King Salman has moved forcefully to challenge the expanding regional influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia's biggest foe, most publicly by embarking on an air war against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. He has also acted to shore up the flagging and deeply divided rebels in Syria, in coordination with Qatar and Turkey, Khashoggi said.

"The result has been an unexpectedly cohesive rebel coalition called the Army of Conquest that is made up of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, an assortment of mostly Islamist brigades and a small number of more moderate battalions. The

coalition, which launched last month, has proved more effective than expected.

“In a commentary for the Middle East Institute in the past week, Robert S. Ford, a former U.S. envoy to Syria, said a regime collapse cannot be ruled out. The regime’s schisms, its battlefield setbacks and its manpower shortages ‘are all signs of weakness,’ he wrote. ‘We may be seeing signs of the beginning of their end.’”

More Israeli Airstrikes

Meanwhile, Israel has reportedly resumed airstrikes against Syrian military bases near Lebanon, possibly aimed at Lebanese Hezbollah forces cooperating with the Assad government in battling Sunni rebels. While refusing to comment directly on these reported airstrikes, Israeli officials have vowed to prevent Syria from transferring sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah.

An earlier Israeli airstrike killed a number of Hezbollah fighters and an Iranian general who was in Syria assisting Assad’s military. Israel also has arranged what amounts to a non-aggression pact with Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, with Israel even providing hospital care for Nusra fighters who then return to the battlefield.

More importantly, Israel has turned loose its powerful Israel Lobby in the United States to rally Republicans and many Democrats to obstruct President Obama’s efforts to work out an agreement with Iran to limit its nuclear program and clear the way for a more constructive relationship with the Shiite-ruled country.

Obama’s overtures toward Iran have alarmed Saudi Arabia, which views itself as leading the Sunni faction in the Middle East. The Saudi disdain for Iran even has led to the Saudis joining sides with Israel in an odd-couple relationship, since both countries now view Iran as their principal adversary.

As this relationship firmed up, Israel even began voicing a preference for Al-Qaeda’s militants over the relatively secular Assad government, which was viewed as the protectors of Alawites, Shiites, Christians and other Syrian minorities terrified of the Saudi-backed Sunni extremists.

In September 2013, in one of the most explicit expressions of Israel’s views, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,”

Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the “bad guys” were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Oren expanded on his position in June 2014 at an Aspen Institute conference. Then, speaking as a former ambassador, Oren said Israel would even prefer a victory by the Islamic State, which was massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria.

“From Israel’s perspective, if there’s got to be an evil that’s got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail,” Oren said.

On Oct. 1, 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu hinted at the new Israeli-Saudi relationship in his United Nations General Assembly speech, which was largely devoted to excoriating Iran over its nuclear program and threatening a unilateral Israeli military strike.

Amid the bellicosity, Netanyahu dropped in a largely missed clue about the evolving power relationships in the Middle East, saying: “The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes.”

The next day, Israel’s Channel 2 TV news reported that senior Israeli security officials had met with a high-level Gulf state counterpart in Jerusalem, believed to be Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States who was then head of Saudi intelligence.

The reality of this unlikely alliance has even reached the mainstream U.S. media. For instance, Time magazine correspondent Joe Klein described the new coziness in an article in the Jan. 19, 2015 issue: “On May 26, 2014, an unprecedented public conversation took place in Brussels. Two former high-ranking spymasters of Israel and Saudi Arabia Amos Yadlin and Prince Turki al-Faisal sat together for more than an hour, talking regional politics in a conversation moderated by the Washington Post’s David Ignatius.

“They disagreed on some things, like the exact nature of an Israel-Palestine peace settlement, and agreed on others: the severity of the Iranian nuclear threat, the need to support the new military government in Egypt, the demand for concerted international action in Syria. The most striking statement came from Prince Turki. He said the Arabs had ‘crossed the Rubicon’ and ‘don’t want to

fight Israel anymore.’”

Rallying Congress

During Netanyahu’s March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress, he further indicated Israel’s preference for the Saudi-backed jihadists over Iranian allies in the Syrian government. He urged the U.S. government to shift its focus from fighting Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to fighting Iran.

Netanyahu depicted the danger from the Islamic State as relatively minor with its “butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube” compared to Iran, which he accused of “gobbling up the nations” of the Middle East.

To the applause of Congress, he claimed “Iran now dominates four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. And if Iran’s aggression is left unchecked, more will surely follow.” His choice of capitals was peculiar, however, because Iran took none of those capitals by force and, indeed, was simply supporting the embattled government of Syria and was allied with Shiite elements of the government of Lebanon.

As for Iraq, Iran’s allies were installed not by Iran but by President George W. Bush via the U.S. invasion. And, in Yemen, a long-festering sectarian conflict has led to the capture of Sanaa by Houthi rebels who are Zaydi Shiites, an offshoot of Shia Islam that is actually closer to some Sunni sects. The Houthis deny they are agents of Iran, and Western intelligence services believe Iran’s support has consisted mostly of some funding.

However, as part of the Saudi-Israeli campaign against Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia has bombed Yemeni cities from the air using sophisticated American-supplied aircraft while the U.S. Navy has supported a blockade of Yemen from the sea, including this past weekend turning back nine Iranian ships carrying relief supplies because of unconfirmed suspicions that there might be weapons onboard as well.

Though the Saudi leadership had agreed to peace talks urged by President Obama, the Saudi air force resumed its bombing of the Yemeni capital of Sanaa and other targets on Sunday. Despite U.S. intelligence support, the Saudi airstrikes have been largely indiscriminate killing hundreds of civilians and shattering some of Yemen’s ancient cities.

Another effect of the Saudi airstrikes has been to bolster the cause of “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” an affiliate that the U.S. government has identified as the most dangerous Al-Qaeda branch in terms of sponsoring attacks on the West. With the Houthi rebels under Saudi bombardment, AQAP has succeeded in seizing more territory in the east and overrunning a prison to free Al-Qaeda

militants.

The most immediate and severe crisis, however, appears to be unfolding in Syria where Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the bloodthirsty Islamic State appear to be gaining the upper hand, with military support from Saudi Arabia and political cover from Israel.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal the Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

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](#).

Shutting Down Debate about Israel

Anyone who dares criticize Israel's treatment of the Palestinians knows what to expect: accusations of being "anti-Israel" or "anti-Semitic." In mainstream political and academic circles, the topic can be especially toxic as "pro-Israel" zealots go to great lengths to block even a debate, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Here is the situation: the threat of aggressive public protests against those assembling to critically discuss the behavior of Israel has become an excuse to shut down such gatherings. [The latest example of this tactic](#), which is really a form of blackmail to impose censorship, took place earlier this month at the University of Southampton in the UK.

[An international conference](#) entitled "International Law and the State of Israel: Legitimacy, Responsibility and Exceptionalism" was scheduled for April 17-19, 2015, at the University of Southampton. It was to bring together lawyers and scholars to examine the legal basis for the establishment of the State of Israel and the rationales (or lack thereof) for its historical treatment of the Palestinian people.

The standard by which these issues were to be judged was international law. The

conference would also have examined the issue of exceptionalism when it came to the inadequate legal and diplomatic response to Israeli policies and behavior. Conference participants were to include both those critical of Israel and those who would present a defense of Israeli practices.

This conference had been planned for over a year, yet days before its opening Southampton University announced that it would not allow the gathering to go ahead on its campus because there were “risks to safety and public order.” This was due to expected protests against the conference.

Where did these risks come from? They originated with Zionists and their allies. Specifically, the Sussex Friends of Israel were ready to bring out as many as 300 peaceful protesters. In addition, there was likely to be a very small number of English Defense League members, who are anti-Muslim, pro-Israel, and potentially violent.

Certainly the Zionist rhetoric was aggressive and emotionally charged. The conference was described as a gathering of “Israel-haters,” “a rally of bigots,” a gathering of “toxic speakers,” and an “anti-Israel carnival.” It made no difference to these ideologically driven zealots that what was really planned was a sober investigation of historical patterns of behavior against the backdrop of internationally recognized legal norms.

Though the negative emotional energy ran high, the actual danger from the planned protests was probably quite minimal, and the local police declared themselves capable and ready to handle the situation. Nonetheless, instead of acting resolutely against those who would threaten free speech, the university simply gave in.

It essentially ran scared not only from exaggerated threats of violence but, as seems always to be the case, from the wrath of a small number of financial donors who threatened to stop supporting the institution if it provided a forum for open discussion of issues that cast Israel in a poor light. Essentially, Southampton University allowed itself to be blackmailed by Zionist censors.

One can speculate on what would have been the case if the situation were reversed. That is, if pro-Palestinian demonstrators had implied a “risk to safety and public order” at a Zionist conference upholding Israeli practices. The army would have been called out before such a conference was canceled.

An Ongoing Tactic

This is not the first time this sort of scenario has played out. Back in 2001 the president of the University of South Florida, Judy Genshaft, forced Dr. Sami Al-Arian, then a member of the faculty, to stay away from the campus because of

negative and slanderous media publicity and Zionist threats against him.

This all stemmed from his vocal support of Palestinian rights. Here too a university administration allowed itself to be blackmailed by ideologically driven zealots. In the process it abandoned the principle of free speech and allowed censorship to prevail through threats of disruption.

There are other suspicious occurrences that may have been brought about by quieter forms of the same censoring pressures. For instance, in March, this writer was invited to address the prestigious Oxford Union in London on a topic that would, in part, cover U.S. foreign policy in support of Israel. Within five days the invitation was withdrawn.

The quick turnaround called into doubt the Oxford Union's claim that the cause of the withdrawal was scheduling problems. While it is not possible to say for sure that the reversal was due to Zionist pressure, the present atmosphere of aggressive Zionist efforts to stymie all criticism of Israel and its supporters, makes this sort of occurrence appear suspicious.

What is going on here is not only the censoring of those critical of Israel, but the undermining of the rule of law, particularly international law. The irony is that much of this body of law was promulgated because of the savage persecution experienced by Europe's Jews and others during the World War II.

However, the Zionist element among Jewry (not all Jews) decided that their future lay not in the support of law, but in the creation of a state through a process of imperial invasion and colonial settlement. They pursued this objective just at the time when both classical imperialism and colonialism were going out of style and the European empires were falling apart.

Thus, even at the moment it succeeded in establishing the State of Israel, Zionism was already an anachronism – an ideology that could only prevail through aggression and racist policies in a world that was trying to outlaw both types of behavior.

That Zionism has, to date, gained its goal is largely due to its having achieved for Israel an "exceptional" status in the West that has allowed it to escape the rule of law. In other words, Israel has evolved into a "rogue" state that is being protected by Western powers, particularly the United States.

Israel has achieved this "exceptional" status by two means: first, the Zionist corruption of Western governments through a lobby process involving the bribing of politicians, and second, through the exploitation of the Western fear of the Arab and Islamic world.

The Zionists always complain that Israel is being singled out. For instance, one of the gambits used to attack the Southampton conference was as follows: “no academic conference on Pakistan, for instance, founded just a year before Israel, would consist solely of discussion on whether it should have been created and how to end it.”

Putting aside the fact that this is an overly simplistic, and thus distorted, description of the Southampton conference, the comparison with Pakistan is off base. Pakistan was created as part of a process of decolonization. Israel was created in defiance of that same process. Zionist ideology, like any form of dogmatic thinking, ends up skewing history to its own needs.

Actually, as long as Israel insists on being “a Jewish state” instead of a democratic state of all its citizens, it *must* walk the path of apartheid. And, it can only get away with that through successfully maintaining an exceptional status – a status that puts it above international law.

The Southampton conference would have exposed this situation in a factual and sober way – in a way that would be hard for any fair-minded person to doubt. That is why the Zionists went to such lengths to shut it down.

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.

Embracing the Saudi War on Yemen

Exclusive: Fearful of further offending the powerful Saudi-Israeli alliance, President Obama is deploying the U.S. Navy to seal off poverty-stricken Yemen so the Saudi air force has free rein to pummel its regional rivals from the air while the population faces a humanitarian crisis on the ground, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the humanitarian crisis in Yemen worsens, the Obama administration seems less concerned about the plight of the desperate Yemeni people than the feelings of the Saudi royals who have spent the last month indiscriminately bombing a nearly defenseless Yemen, using high-tech U.S. jets and bombs to reportedly kill hundreds of civilians and damage its ancient cities.

On Friday, the Obama administration took credit for blocking nine Iranian ships from reaching Yemen with relief supplies, claiming that the ships may have carried weapons that the Yemenis could use in their civil war or to defend against Saudi attacks. President Barack Obama had dispatched a U.S. aircraft carrier fleet to the Yemeni coast to enforce an embargo that has helped the Saudis seal off the country from outside help.

A person closely involved with the Yemen crisis told me that the Iranian ships carried food and medicine, not weapons, but turned back to avoid the risk and humiliation of being boarded by the U.S. Navy. Meanwhile, Yemen, already one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, is facing shortages of basic supplies since the Saudis have cut off normal trade routes into Yemen.

Yet, despite the suffering of Yemen, the U.S. government appears more worried about the sensitivities of Saudi Arabia, one of the richest countries in the region. A Defense Department official, speaking anonymously, told the New York Times that it was “important that the Saudis know that we have an arm around their shoulders.”

Defense Department officials also acknowledged that they didn’t know what type of cargo was being transported aboard the Iranian ships, the Times reported. Though the Obama administration had touted the possibility that the Iranian ships carried weapons, the decision by Iran to avoid a confrontation may have reflected Tehran’s desire not to worsen relations with the United States and thus disrupt fragile negotiations over international guarantees to ensure that its nuclear program remains peaceful.

But the losers in this military/diplomatic maneuvering appear to be the Yemenis who, in effect, face a Saudi strategy of starving the country into submission with the help of the United States. While U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power built her public image as a “humanitarian interventionist” asserting a “responsibility to protect” vulnerable populations, she has said little about the Saudi role in Yemen’s humanitarian crisis.

In a statement on April 14, at the height of the Saudi bombing campaign, Power made no mention of the Saudi attacks or the hundreds of civilian dead from Saudi bombs supplied by the United States. She instead focused her denunciations on the Houthi rebels and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh who have joined forces in a civil war that ousted sitting President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who then fled to Saudi Arabia.

Power primarily blamed the Houthis, who “have intensified their military campaign, bombed Aden, and extended their offensive to Yemen’s south. These actions have caused widespread violence and instability that threaten the

security and welfare of the Yemeni people, as well as the region's security."

Though the Saudi air force has bombed a number of cities including the ancient port city of Aden, Power ignored those attacks in her statement. But Power was not alone in her solicitousness toward the Saudis. On Friday, Secretary of State John Kerry even endorsed the Saudi bombing of Houthi targets in Yemen.

Who Are the Houthis?

The Houthis adhere to the Zaydi sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam but one that is considered relatively close to Sunni Islam and that peacefully co-existed with Sunni Islam for centuries. But the Houthis have been resisting what they regard as government persecution in recent decades.

As revealed in leaked U.S. government cables and documented by Human Rights Watch, Yemen's government used U.S. military aid to support an all-out assault against the Houthis in 2009. HRW said Yemeni government forces indiscriminately shelled and bombed civilian areas, causing significant civilian casualties and violating the laws of war. This repression of the Houthis led to an escalation last fall which ended with the Houthi rebels, who allied themselves with army forces loyal to ex-President Saleh, capturing Sanaa and other major cities.

After these victories, in private contacts with American officials, the Houthis indicated their readiness to take the fight to Al-Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate. However, since the Saudi airstrikes began a month ago, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" has taken advantage of the limitations on Houthi rebel movements by grabbing more territory in the east and overrunning a prison that held a number of Al-Qaeda militants.

The Saudi royals have a complicated relationship with Al-Qaeda including some princes who are viewed as important financiers of the terror group. The Saudis also promote the same extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam, known as Wahhabism. Now, instead of concentrating on the terror threat from Al-Qaeda, the Saudis have sought to portray the Yemeni civil war as a proxy assault in Saudi Arabia's backyard by Shiite-ruled Iran.

In that propaganda effort, the Saudis have been helped by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who has relied on the powerful Israel Lobby and his own rhetoric to divert the U.S. Congress from a focus on Al-Qaeda and its hyper-brutal spinoff, the Islamic State, to Iran, which both Saudi Arabia and Israel have designated their primary regional enemy.

In his March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress, Netanyahu cited Yemen as one of the Mideast countries that Iran has been "gobbling up." Many regional experts, however, considered Netanyahu's assertion ludicrous given the

Houthis' reputation for stubborn independence.

For instance, former CIA official Graham E. Fuller called the notion "that the Houthis represent the cutting edge of Iranian imperialism in Arabia as trumpeted by the Saudis" a "myth." He added:

"The Zaydi Shia, including the Houthis, over history have never had a lot to do with Iran. But as internal struggles within Yemen have gone on, some of the Houthis have more recently been happy to take Iranian coin and perhaps some weapons, just as so many others, both Sunni and Shia, are on the Saudi payroll. The Houthis furthermore hate al-Qaeda and hate the Islamic State."

But the Obama administration remains sensitive to Israeli-Saudi criticism of its efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the Iranian nuclear dispute. So, to demonstrate that the Americans are comforting the Saudi royals with "an arm around their shoulders," the U.S. government is embracing the Saudi bombardment of a largely defenseless country and is turning back ships carrying relief supplies.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal the Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

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](#).

Making Unnecessary Enemies in Yemen

The Saudi-Israeli tandem is trying to pull the U.S. and other militaries into the Yemeni civil war by arguing that the Houthi rebels are Iranian proxies. But the reality is much more nuanced and the American interest may go in a different direction, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A strong Manichean streak runs through American perceptions of the outside world. That streak involves a habit of seeing all conflict and instability in binomial terms, a presumption that one of the perceived two sides is good and

the other bad, and an urge to weigh in on the presumptively good side.

The influence that these tendencies have had on U.S. policy has varied over time. The influence was readily apparent, for example, during the George W. Bush administration's days of "you're either with us or with the terrorists." The Obama administration has tried to move in a less Manichean and more realist direction, especially in conducting diplomacy with Iran and in so doing opening a door to a more fruitful all-azimuths diplomacy in the Middle East generally.

But the current administration still operates in a political environment in which the old perceptual habits set limits on what the administration can do, or perhaps push it into doing things it might not otherwise have done.

There have been ample demonstrations throughout the Middle East of how inaccurate and inapplicable the Manichean perspective is. There is Iraq, where the United States and the Iranian *bÃ¢te noire* are on the same side in countering the so-called Islamic State or ISIS. There is the even more complicated deadly brawl in Syria, where the people who from the viewpoint of the West are the closest thing to good guys are opposing the same regime that also is opposed by ISIS and the local al-Qaeda affiliate.

At least as clear a lesson both in the fallacies of the Manichean perspective and the mistake of the United States taking sides in such conflicts is found in the current strife in Yemen. But the lesson does not seem to have been learned, as reflected in U.S. support for the Saudi military intervention in Yemen. Three major features of the conflict in Yemen are pertinent to that lesson.

One is that the conflict is at least as complicated and multidimensional as any others in the Middle East. It is impossible to draw a line that would put everyone worth supporting on one side and everyone worth opposing on the other, or even to come close to doing that.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, often considered the most capable Al-Qaeda affiliate today, is completely at odds with, and a confirmed enemy of, the Houthi forces who are the principal target of the U.S.-backed Saudi intervention. One of the most significant allies of the Houthis is Ali Abdullah Saleh, who for three decades was America's guy as ruler of Yemen.

Second, this war is, as Adam Baron has put it, "by and large, an internal Yemeni political conflict" that "remains deeply rooted in local Yemeni issues." This fact has been obscured by those who, intent on depicting Iran as a dangerous wide-ranging regional renegade, portray the Houthi rebellion as part of some Iranian expansionist plan. It is nothing of the sort.

The Houthis have been driven for years by grievances involving the distribution

of resources and power within Yemen, and their more recent gains have mostly reflected the sympathy for those grievances among other Yemeni elements who have been similarly displeased and disadvantaged by the most recent Yemeni regimes.

Third, the motivations of outside actors intervening in this conflict are not ones that the United States ought to associate itself with. One set of motivations is sectarian. There is no advantage at all, and lots of disadvantage, for the United States to be seen identifying with one side or another in sectarian disputes within the Muslim world.

Another set of motivations, rooted in decades of Saudi-Yemeni strife dating back to when the expansion of the Saudi kingdom first led to seizure of traditionally Yemeni provinces and to lingering border disputes, involves a Saudi desire to exercise dominance over the Arabian Peninsula and in particular this part of it.

Graham Fuller observes, "Riyadh has always loathed Yemeni feistiness, independence, its revolutionary politics, and even its experiments with democracy."

The Saudis publicly play up the Iranian angle, but what they really don't like about the Houthis is that they haven't been able to buy off the Houthis as effectively as they have many other Yemeni elements. The Saudi objective of maintaining this kind of overlordship over its neighbors is also not an interest that the United States shares.

And yet the urge to take sides and intervene persists, as reflected in recent remarks about the Yemeni case by John McCain. The urge pays insufficient heed either to what is in U.S. interests or to what is effective. McCain asserted that the Saudis did not seek advance coordination with the United States concerning their intervention "because they believe we are siding with Iran."

Actually, according to a senior officer at U.S. Central Command, "The reason the Saudis didn't inform us of their plans is because they knew we would have told them exactly what we think, that it was a bad idea."

We know that the Obama administration is feeling the need these days to appear supportive of the Gulf Arabs because of angst related to the impending nuclear agreement with Iran. And if catering to that angst is one of the prices that has to be paid to get the agreement and, through it, to get closer to liberating U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East from rigid side-taking in the future, then this policy may turn out to be on balance worthwhile.

But the Yemeni conflict itself still ought to serve as a lesson in the multiple reasons the United States would be better off to resist its side-taking urge.

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.)

Did Money Seal Israeli-Saudi Alliance?

Special Report: The odd-couple relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel may have been sealed with more than a mutual desire to kiss-off Iran. According to an intelligence source, there was a dowry involved, too, with the Saudis reportedly giving Israel some \$16 billion, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For more than half a century, Saudi Arabia has tried to use its vast oil wealth to build a lobby in the United States that could rival the imposing Israel Lobby. At top dollar, the Saudis hired law firms and PR specialists and exploited personal connections to powerful families like the Bushes but the Saudis never could build the kind of grassroots political organization that has given Israel and its American backers such extraordinary clout.

Indeed, Americans who did take Saudi money including academic institutions and non-governmental organizations were often pilloried as tools of the Arabs, with the Israel Lobby and its propagandists raising the political cost of accepting Saudi largesse so high that many people and institutions shied away.

But Saudi Arabia may have found another way to buy influence inside the United States by giving money to Israel and currying favor with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Over the past several years, as both Saudi Arabia and Israel have identified Iran and the so-called "Shiite crescent" as their principal enemies, this once-unthinkable alliance has become possible and the Saudis, as they are wont to do, may have thrown lots of money into the deal.

According to a source briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts, the Saudis have given Israel at least \$16 billion over the past 2 ½ years, funneling the money through a third-country Arab state and into an Israeli "development" account in Europe to help finance infrastructure inside Israel. The source first called the account "a Netanyahu slush fund," but later refined that characterization, saying the money was used for public projects such as building settlements in the West Bank.

In other words, according to this information, the Saudis concluded that if you

can't beat the Israel Lobby, try buying it. And, if that is the case, the Saudis have found their behind-the-scenes collaboration with Israel extremely valuable. Netanyahu has played a key role in lining up the U.S. Congress to fight an international agreement to resolve a long-running dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Urged on by Netanyahu, the Republican majority and many Democrats have committed themselves to destroying the framework agreement hammered out on April 2 by Iran and six world powers, including the United States. The deal would impose strict inspections and other limits to guarantee that Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful.

By crashing the deal, Israel and Saudi Arabia would open the door to more punitive sanctions on Iran and possibly clear the way for Israeli airstrikes, with Saudi Arabia granting over-flight permission to Israeli warplanes. The Saudi-Israeli tandem also might hope to pull in the U.S. military to inflict even more devastation on Iranian targets.

Neither the Israeli nor Saudi governments responded to requests for comment on Saudi payments into an Israeli account.

Congressional Acclaim

The reported Saudi-to-Israel money transfers put Netanyahu's March 3 speech to a cheering joint session of the U.S. Congress in a different light, too. The Prime Minister's bitter denunciations of Iran before hundreds of transfixed American lawmakers could be viewed as him demonstrating his value to the Saudi royals who could never dream of getting that kind of reaction themselves.

Indeed, as Congress now moves to sabotage the Iranian nuclear agreement, the Saudis could be finding that whatever money they invested in Israel is money well spent. The Saudis seem especially alarmed that the nuclear agreement would prompt the world community to lift sanctions on Iran, thus allowing its economy and its influence to grow.

To prevent that, the Saudis desperately want to draw the United States in on the Sunni side of the historic Sunni-Shiite conflict, with Netanyahu serving as a crucial middleman by defying President Barack Obama on the Iran deal and bringing the full force of the Israel Lobby to bear on Congress and on the opinion circles of Official Washington.

If Netanyahu and the Saudis succeed in collapsing the Iran nuclear framework agreement, they will have made great strides toward enlisting the United States as the primary military force on the Sunni side of the Sunni-Shiite sectarian divide, a dispute that dates back to the succession struggle after Prophet

Muhammad's death in 632.

This ancient feud has become a Saudi obsession over the past several decades, at least since Iran's Shiite revolution overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1979 and brought to power the Islamic government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Upset with the ouster of a fellow monarch, the Shah, and fearing the spread of Khomeini's ascetic form of Shiite Islamic governance, the Saudi royals summoned Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, a fellow Sunni, to Riyadh on Aug. 5, 1980, to encourage him to invade Iran.

According to top secret "Talking Points" that Secretary of State Alexander Haig prepared for a briefing of President Ronald Reagan after Haig's April 1981 trip to the Middle East, Haig wrote that Saudi Prince Fahd said he told the Iraqis that an invasion of Iran would have U.S. support.

"It was interesting to confirm that President [Jimmy] Carter gave the Iraqis a green light to launch the war against Iran through Fahd," Haig wrote, in the document that I discovered in U.S. congressional files in 1994. Though Carter has denied encouraging the Iraqi invasion, which came as Iran was holding 52 U.S. diplomats hostage, Haig's "Talking Points" suggest that the Saudis at least led Hussein to believe that the war had U.S. blessings.

Haig also noted that even after the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic state under Khomeini, Israel sought to maintain its clandestine relations with Iran by serving as an arms supplier. Haig reported that "Both [Egypt's Anwar] Sadat and [Saudi Prince] Fahd [explained that] Iran is receiving military spares for U.S. equipment from Israel."

Those Israeli weapons sales continued through the eight bloody years of the Iran-Iraq War with some estimates of the value reaching into the scores of billions of dollars. The Israelis even helped bring the Reagan administration into the deals in the mid-1980s with the so-called Iran-Contra arms shipments that involved secret off-the-books bank accounts in Europe and led to the worst scandal of Reagan's presidency.

Rise of the Neocons

In the 1990s with the Iran-Iraq war over and Iran's treasury depleted Israeli attitudes cooled toward its erstwhile trading partner. Meanwhile, American neocons juiced by the demonstration of U.S. military supremacy against Iraq during the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union leaving the U.S. as "the sole superpower" began advising Netanyahu on employing "regime change" to alter the Mideast dynamic.

During Netanyahu's 1996 campaign, prominent neocons including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith outlined the plan in a policy paper entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm." The document argued that "Israel can shape its strategic environment by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right, as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

The overriding point of this neocon strategy was that by imposing "regime change" in Muslim nations that were deemed hostile to Israel, new friendly governments could be put in place, thus leaving Israel's close-in enemies Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon without outside sponsors. Starved of money, these troublesome enemies would be forced to accept Israel's terms. "The Realm" would be secured.

The neocons first target was Sunni-ruled Iraq, as their Project for the New American Century made clear in 1998, but Syria and Iran were next on the hit list. Syria is governed by the Assads who are Alawites, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and Iran is governed by Shiites. The neocon plan was to use U.S. military force or other means of subversion to take out all three regimes.

However, when the neocons got their chance to invade Iraq in 2003, they inadvertently tipped the Mideast balance in favor of the Shiites, since Iraq's Shiite majority gained control under the U.S. military occupation. Plus, the disastrous U.S. war precluded the neocons from completing their agenda of enforced "regime change" in Syria and Iran.

With the new Iraqi government suddenly friendly with Iran's Shiite leaders, Saudi Arabia became increasingly alarmed. Israel was also coming to view the so-called "Shiite crescent" from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut as a strategic threat.

Saudi Arabia, working with Turkey, took aim at the center of that crescent in 2011 by supporting a Sunni-led opposition to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a set of protests that quickly spiraled into bloody terrorist attacks and harsh military repression.

By 2013, it was clear that the principal fighters against Assad's government were not the fictional "moderates" touted by the U.S. mainstream media but Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and a hyper-brutal Al-Qaeda spinoff that arose in resistance to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and evolved into the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" or simply the "Islamic State."

Israeli Preference

To the surprise of some observers, Israel began voicing a preference for Al-Qaeda's militants over the relatively secular Assad government, which was viewed as the protectors of Alawites, Shiites, Christians and other Syrian minorities terrified of the Saudi-backed Sunni extremists.

In September 2013, in one of the most explicit expressions of Israel's views, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc," Oren told the Jerusalem Post in [an interview](#). "We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Oren expanded on his position in June 2014 at an Aspen Institute conference. Then, speaking as a former ambassador, Oren [said](#) Israel would even prefer a victory by the Islamic State, which was massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria.

"From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

On Oct. 1, 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu hinted at the new Israeli-Saudi relationship in his United Nations General Assembly speech, which was largely devoted to excoriating Iran over its nuclear program and threatening a unilateral Israeli military strike.

Amid the bellicosity, Netanyahu dropped in a largely missed clue about the evolving power relationships in the Middle East, saying: "The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes."

The next day, Israel's Channel 2 TV news [reported](#) that senior Israeli security officials had met with a high-level Gulf state counterpart in Jerusalem, believed to be Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States who was then head of Saudi intelligence.

The reality of this unlikely alliance has even reached the mainstream U.S. media. For instance, Time magazine correspondent Joe Klein described the new coziness in an article in the Jan. 19, 2015 issue: "On May 26, 2014, an unprecedented public conversation took place in Brussels. Two former high-ranking spymasters of Israel and Saudi Arabia Amos Yadlin and Prince Turki al-Faisal sat together for more than an hour, talking regional politics in a conversation moderated by the Washington Post's David Ignatius.

"They disagreed on some things, like the exact nature of an Israel-Palestine peace settlement, and agreed on others: the severity of the Iranian nuclear threat, the need to support the new military government in Egypt, the demand for concerted international action in Syria. The most striking statement came from Prince Turki. He said the Arabs had 'crossed the Rubicon' and 'don't want to fight Israel anymore.'"

While the Saudis may still pay lip service to the plight of the Palestinians, that issue is no longer much of a priority. Indeed, the Saudi royals may view the Palestinians, many of whom are secular having seen first-hand the evils of Islamic extremism, as something of a regional threat to the Saudi monarchical governance which is based on an ultra-fundamentalist form of Islam known as Wahhabism. That some of the reported \$16 billion Saudi payment to Israel was going to finance Israeli settlements on the Palestinian West Bank would further reflect this Saudi indifference.

In 2013, again collaborating with Israel, Saudi Arabia helped deal a devastating blow to the 1.8 million Palestinians locked in the Gaza Strip. They had received some relief when Egypt elected the Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohamed Morsi, who relaxed the embargo on passage between Egyptian territory and Gaza.

But the Saudis saw the populist Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to monarchical rule and Israel was angry over Morsi's apparent sympathy for Hamas, the party ruling Gaza. So, Saudi Arabia and Israel supported a military coup which removed Morsi from power. The two countries then showed off their complementary powers: the Saudis helped the government of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi with money and oil, while Israel had its lobby work the corridors of power in Washington to prevent retaliation for the ouster of an elected government.

Back to Syria

Israel's growing collaboration with Saudi Arabia and the two governments' mutual hatred of the "Shiite crescent" have extended into a tacit alliance with Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front in Syria, with which the Israelis have what amounts to a

non-aggression pact, even caring for Nusra fighters in Israeli hospitals and mounting lethal air attacks against Lebanese and Iranian advisers to the Syrian military.

Israel's preference for the Saudi-backed jihadists over Iranian allies in Syria was a little-noticed subtext of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's address to Congress on March 3, urging the U.S. government to shift its focus from fighting Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to fighting Iran. He trivialized the danger from the Islamic State with its "butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube" compared to Iran, which he accused of "gobbling up the nations" of the Middle East.

To the applause of Congress, he claimed "Iran now dominates four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. And if Iran's aggression is left unchecked, more will surely follow." His choice of capitals was peculiar, however, because Iran took none of those capitals by force and, indeed, was simply supporting the embattled government of Syria and was allied with Shiite elements of the government of Lebanon.

As for Iraq, Iran's allies were installed not by Iran but by President George W. Bush via the U.S. invasion. And, in Yemen, a long-festering sectarian conflict has led to the capture of Sanaa by Houthi rebels who are Zaydi Shiites, an offshoot of Shia Islam that is actually closer to some Sunni sects.

The Houthis deny that they are agents of Iran, and Western intelligence services believe that Iranian support has consisted mostly of some funding. Former CIA official Graham E. Fuller has called the notion "that the Houthis represent the cutting edge of Iranian imperialism in Arabia as trumpeted by the Saudis" a "myth." He added:

"The Zaydi Shia, including the Houthis, over history have never had a lot to do with Iran. But as internal struggles within Yemen have gone on, some of the Houthis have more recently been happy to take Iranian coin and perhaps some weapons, just as so many others, both Sunni and Shia, are on the Saudi payroll. The Houthis furthermore hate al-Qaeda and hate the Islamic State."

Indeed, the Saudi airstrikes, which have reportedly killed hundreds of Yemeni civilians, have aided the Yemen-based "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" by limiting Houthi attacks on the terrorists and enabling AQAP to overrun a prison and free scores of its militants.

But President Obama, recognizing the joint power of the Saudis and Israelis to destroy the Iran nuclear deal, authorized support for the Saudi airstrikes from U.S. intelligence while rushing military resupplies to the Saudis. In effect,

Obama is trading U.S. support for Saudi aggression in a neighboring country for what he hopes might be some political space for the Iran-nuclear agreement.

New Terrorist Gains

Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies, along with Turkey, are also ramping up support in Syria for Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State. Flush with jihadist reinforcements, the two terrorist organizations have seized new territory in recent weeks, including the Islamic State creating a humanitarian crisis by attacking a Palestinian refugee camp south of Damascus.

All of these Saudi actions have drawn minimal criticism from mainstream U.S. media and political circles, in part, because the Saudis now have the protection of the Israel Lobby, which has kept American attention on the supposed threat from Iran, including allegedly controversial statements from Iranian leaders about their insistence that economic sanctions be lifted once the nuclear agreement is signed and/or implemented.

Neocon warmongers have even been granted space in major U.S. newspapers, including the Washington Post and the New York Times, to openly advocate for the bombing of Iran despite the risk that destroying Iran's nuclear reactors could inflict both human and environmental devastation. That might serve the Saudi-Israeli interests by forcing Iran to focus exclusively on a domestic crisis but it would amount to a major war crime. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Publishes Call to Bomb Iran.](#)"]

The strategic benefit for Israel and Saudi Arabia would be that with Iran unable to assist the Iraqis and the Syrians in their desperate struggles against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the Sunni jihadists might well be hoisting the black flag of their dystopian philosophy over Damascus, if not Baghdad. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Secret Saudi Ties to Terrorism.](#)"]

Beyond the slaughter of innocents that would follow and the likelihood of new terrorist attacks on the West such a victory would almost surely force whoever is the U.S. president to recommit hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to remove Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State from power. It would be a war of vast expense in money and blood with little prospect of American success.

If Saudi Arabia's petrodollars helped secure Israel's assistance in creating such a potential hell on earth, the Saudi royals might consider it the best money they ever spent and the resulting orgy of military spending by the U.S. government might [benefit some well-connected neocons,](#) too but the many victims of this madness would certainly feel otherwise as might the vast majority of the American people.

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](#).

Russia Impinges on Israeli 'Right' to Bomb Iran

Exclusive: American neocons are in a lather over Russia's decision to go ahead with the sale of anti-aircraft missiles to Iran. The apparent outrage is that Iran thinks it has a right to protect its citizens from Israel's right to launch airstrikes into Iran's territory, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

The front page of the neocon flagship Washington Post on Tuesday warned that the Russians have decided, despite U.S. objections, "to send an advanced air-defense system to Iran ... potentially altering the strategic balance in the Middle East."

So, at least, says the lede of an article entitled "Putin lifts 5-year hold on missile sale to Iran" by Karoun Demirjian, whose editors apparently took it upon themselves to sex up the first paragraph, which was not at all supported by the rest of her story which was factual and fair balanced, even.

Not only did Demirjian include much of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's [explanation](#) of Moscow's decision to end its self-imposed restriction on the delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran, but she mentioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's umpteenth warning on Monday about "the prospect of airstrikes to destroy or hinder Tehran's nuclear program."

Lavrov noted that United Nations resolutions "did not impose any restrictions on providing air defense weapons to Iran" and described the "separate Russian free-will embargo" as "irrelevant" in the light of the "meaningful progress" achieved by the negotiated framework deal of April 2 in which Iran accepted unprecedented constraints on its nuclear program to show that it was intended for peaceful purposes only.

The Russian Foreign Minister emphasized that the S-300 is a "completely

defensive weapon [that] will not endanger the security of any state in the region, certainly including Israel.” Pointing to “the extremely tense situation in the region around Iran, he said modern air-defense systems are vitally important for that country.” Lavrov added that by freezing the S-300 contract for five years, Russia also had lost a lot of money. (The deal is said to be worth \$800 million.)

Predictably, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton told Fox News that the air-defense system would be a “game-changer” for Israel regarding air strikes. According to Bolton, once the system is in place, only stealth bombers would be able to penetrate Iranian space, and only the U.S. has those and was not likely to use them.

The U.S. media also highlighted comments by popular go-to retired Air Force three-star General David A. Deptula, who served as Air Force deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance until he retired in 2010 to make some real money. Deptula called delivering the S-300 system to Iran “significant, as it complicates the calculus for planning any military action involving air strikes.”

It strikes me as a bit strange that the media likes to feature retired generals like Deptula, whose reputation for integrity are not the best. Deptula has been temporarily barred from doing business with the government after what Air Force Deputy General Counsel Randy Grandon described as “particularly egregious” breaches of post-employment rules. He remains, however, a media favorite.

Adding to his woes, Deptula was also caught with 125 classified documents on his personal laptop including 10 labeled “Secret,” 14 labeled “Top Secret” and one with the high protection of “Secret, Compartmented Information.” Deptula pleaded ignorance and was let off further proof that different standards apply to generals like Deptula and David Petraeus.

A More Subdued Tone

The S-300 announcement hit as Secretary of State John Kerry was testifying on Capitol Hill about the framework deal on Iran’s nuclear program. Speaking later to Fox News, Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Illinois, professed shock that Kerry did not seem more upset. According to Kinzinger, Kerry actually said, “You have to understand Iran’s perspective.”

And in keeping with Kerry’s tone of sang-froid, State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf, referring to the S-300 deal, said, “We see this as separate from the negotiations [regarding Iran’s nuclear program], and we don’t think this will have an impact on our unity.”

White House press secretary Josh Earnest took the S-300 announcement with his customary, studied earnestness. Referring not only to the decision to deliver the S-300s but also to reports of a \$20 billion barter deal that would involve Russia buying 500,000 barrels of oil a day in return for Russian grain, equipment and construction materials, Earnest referred to “potential sanctions concerns” and said the U.S. would “evaluate these two proposals moving forward,” adding that the U.S. has been in direct touch with Russia to make sure the Russians understand and they do the potential concerns that we have.”

With respect to the various sanctions against Iran, I believe this nonchalant tone can be seen largely as whistling in the dark. With the S-300 and the barter deals, Russia is putting a huge dent in the sanctions regimes. From now on, money is likely to call the shots, as competitors vie for various slices of the Iranian and the Russian pie. Whether or not there is a final agreement by the end of June on the Iranian nuclear issue, Washington is not likely to be able to hold the line on sanctions and will become even more isolated if it persists in trying.

Worse still for the neocons and others who favor using sanctions to punish Russia over Ukraine, the lifting of sanctions against Iran may have a cascading effect. If, for example, the Ukrainian ceasefire holds more or less over the next months, it is possible that the \$1.5 billion sale of two French-built Mistral-Class helicopter carrier ships to Russia, concluded four years ago, will go through.

The contract does not expire for two months and Russia’s state arms exporter is trying to work out a compromise before taking France to court. Russian officials are expressing hope that a compromise can be reached within the time left.

And, regarding the outrage among neocons over the audacious idea that Iran should be allowed to defend itself against airstrikes, there is the “exceptional” argument that Israel, United States and their allies should have the unchallenged right to bomb Iran or any other country as they see fit and that the targeted country should have no right to protect its people, indeed that trying to defend itself is some kind of unacceptable provocation.

There is also the hypocrisy regarding how the neocons like to differentiate between “defensive” and “offensive” weapons when the question is about giving U.S.-backed governments weapons that have dual purposes, that can be used offensively as well as defensively.

For instance, in regard to Ukraine earlier this year, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland counseled U.S. officials to portray the delivery of sophisticated U.S. military hardware to the coup regime in Kiev as “defensive,”

even though the weapons had an offensive capacity, such as targeting ethnic Russian rebels firing artillery or mortars at Ukrainian troops attacking eastern Ukraine.

According to the German newspaper, *Bild*, which published an intercepted conversation between Nuland and U.S. officials in Munich, Germany, she said, "I'd strongly urge you to use the phrase 'defensive systems' that we would deliver to oppose Putin's 'offensive systems.'"

However, NATO Commander and Air Force General Philip Breedlove left little doubt that these "defensive" weapons would help the Ukrainian government pursue its military objectives by enabling more effective concentration of fire. "Russian artillery is by far what kills most Ukrainian soldiers, so a system is needed that can localize the source of fire and repress it," Breedlove reportedly said.

So, when "defensive" weapons help a U.S.-backed regime kill its opponents, that's fine. However, if some truly defensive weapons, such as anti-aircraft missiles to protect a country's cities, go to a nation that Israel might want to bomb, then that is unacceptable.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his earlier, 27-year career as a CIA analyst, he led the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and prepared and briefed the *President's Daily Brief*. He now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Saudis Pour Oil on the Mideast Fire

Saudi Arabia, now in alliance with Israel and with tacit U.S. approval, is dragging the Middle East into a nightmare of sectarian conflict, pitting its own warplanes and Sunni terrorists against Shiites, Christians and other minorities as part of a misguided competition with Iran, as Anthony F. Shaker describes.

Anthony F. Shaker

While denouncing Iran and its supposed Yemeni "Shi'a" allies in a recent speech, the governor of Saudi Arabia's eastern province, Saud ibn Nayyef bin Abdel Aziz, put his country's Shi'a community, fellow citizens, squarely in his sights.

"While our country is going through what it is going through and standing together as one bloc," he ranted, "we find the descendants of the Safavid

Abdullah ibn Saba who try to divide that bloc.”

“Abdullah ibn Saba” refers to a Seventh-Century Jewish convert to Islam whose existence is uncertain but who has become a useful myth. True to every other brand of Salafist takfiris, Wahhabi clerics and Saudi government officials alike insist that a Jew “founded” Shi’ism and that his purpose was to destroy Islam from within.

Happily for them this unsavory and, to historians, comically false claim connects “Iran” and “Shi’ism” to the “Jews.”

Yet, there is nothing out of the ordinary in the governor’s diatribe. The United States’ second most important ally in the Middle East fully intends to play its sectarian card to the hilt. The signs are everywhere.

Saudi Arabia has for decades been operating international youth organizations and “Islamic centers” dedicated to the spread of the Wahhabi ideology in Great Britain, North and South America, Asia, and Africa. These organizations have created the “religious” environment that is enticing so many young people to join jihadi causes in Syria, Iraq and other countries.

Thanks to their pervasive influence, the Saudi government has been able to take on the role of defending “Sunni” Islam. But there is a reason why it has taken decades for such patronizing revisionism of Islam to gain traction among Sunni Muslims.

The Saudis’ official religion, Wahhabism, was founded by an itinerant heretic named Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. Before he died in 1792, he managed to make alliance with violent tribesmen of the al-Saud tribe in the remote Najd desert. At the behest of the Ottomans, though, Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali promptly crushed the movement in a military campaign that lasted seven years starting in 1811.

British Interference

It was only thanks to the British-orchestrated insurrection against the Ottomans around World War I that the House of Saud re-entered history big time. It is hardly a coincidence that wartime marked also the precise point in time when terrorism became an element in the Middle East equation.

With the situation in Palestine approaching a point of no return, the British government wanted quickly to install al-Saud as the new custodians of the two sacred cities, Mecca and Medina, based on a view modeled explicitly on the Vatican State. It mattered little that such an institution would be utterly alien to Muslims.

The British ended up placing Saudi princelings in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, for good measure. This was how the House of Saud was able to extend its influence in many directions, laying the foundation for a new ethnicity in the form of "Arabism," given the weakness of its Islamic credentials.

It is often forgotten that Wahhabism permeated even the secular debate in the Arabic-speaking world, especially in Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s. Many movements around the world began to pattern themselves on Mussolini's fascist phalanges. The Muslim Brotherhood is only the most prominent. They benefited from both the latter's organizational strengths and the illusion of a homegrown, Wahhabi-inspired religiosity.

"Arabism" and "pan-Arabism" of course, are the other card that Saudi Arabia has recently been playing at the League of Arab States to keep other "Arabs" in line in times of crisis, specifically, against Iran. Never mind that before World War I the word "Arab" used to carry a distinctly pejorative meaning. The truth is that the Wahhabi Saudis have been playing both cards since World War II for purposes that have nothing to do with either religion or the welfare of the Arabic-speaking world.

While their brazen anti-Shi'ism has taken alarming proportions since war broke out in Syria, the politics of "religious purity" is looking more like a flimsy cover, designed less to accommodate their designs on the region than to hide a deep-seated panic.

With Saudi Arabia's frontal assault on the sovereign state of Yemen, its armed forces and its fragile ethnic mosaic, Saudi King Salman thought he had executed a master stroke by extending the sectarian virus to yet another country, with no consequences except for Iran. Backed by his trillion-dollar paper economy, King Salman continues to point accusingly at Iran for supposedly arming the Houthi-led Ansarullah party and for wanting to "dominate" neighboring states.

Unfortunately for the aging Saudi monarch, it takes two to tango. Iran for obvious strategic reasons would never think of playing a similar card even if it wanted to. Why should it? It has lots of "Sunni" friends.

The most that the Saudis can boast, on the other hand, are surreptitious links with a cult-like organization of Iranian exiles called the Mujahidin-e Khalq, with its well-documented history of mass murder and a longstanding association with the Israeli Mossad. This underlying imbalance of forces aggravates the Saudi hysteria over Iran's "overreach" in Yemen, even though the Zaydis there are doctrinally closer to the four branches of so-called Sunni Islam than to Twelver Shi'a.

In the real world, a Saudi miscalculation in Yemen, triggered by the Americans' defensively reactive approval of the air strikes, would risk incalculable and largely self-inflicted damage to Western interests. Instead of toning down this Saudi sectarianism, though, King Salman is ratcheting it up on the home front too, as he tries to repress the Shi'a community in the oil-producing eastern province.

"If you look at any local media here as well as in the mosques, it is all full of sectarianism. Everybody is talking about Shiite and Sunni, saying the Shiites endanger the safety of the Sunnis," *Middle East Eye* reported one eastern resident of Qatif as saying.

A Tight Corner

The Saudis have now maneuvered themselves into a tight corner. Not even Saudi-dependent Pakistan will come to their aid; and Egypt is "there but not there." If the Saudi king fails to "destroy" the Houthi-led Ansarullah party, a goal he has repeatedly declared, together with the bulk of the Yemeni army, he could never regain his country's pride of place under the American wing, alongside Israel. In his tunnel vision, that would only leave Iran unshackled and free to "reign" wherever it pleases.

So far, Saudi Arabia has been relying on secret international networks that the Saudis helped create but which are associated with al-Qaeda, foremost, but also the Syrian Ahrar al-Sham (of the Islamic Front), Nusra Front and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL). The object is to destabilize or pile pressure on any wayward state.

These organizations may be the Saudis' only remaining true allies in the region but they have almost unlimited manpower. Their members are drawn from more than a hundred nations, the largest European contingency of which has been consistently French. Every few months a new army is raised from the tens of thousands of rootless indoctrinated "Muslims" rushing to visit unspeakable violence upon fellow Muslims and minorities.

There is now solid evidence that Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey, is facilitating this flow of jihadist manpower.

Just before Saudi Arabia's bombardment of Yemen, terrorist organizations received a second wind in Syria from the thousands of specially trained fighters that had slipped inside the country. They seized a key town near the Jordanian border in the south and the provincial capital of Idlib near Turkey in the north. Saudi officials have made no secret that they were involved and that a new management has taken over, a clear rebuff to American reticence.

Israel is very happy. It has been trying for months to provide cover and logistics to allow those same terrorists to hold on to the Golan permanently, where it has no intention of ceding annexed Syrian territory, peace treaty or no peace.

Foreign-sponsored Wahhabis have proved their mettle fomenting violent sectarian hatreds where none existed before in the history of Islamic civilization. But their real talent is state demolition, under the cover of religious ideology. Nothing more. They have the means to impose their ramshackled set of "Shari'a" laws, the legal origins of which no one can quite make out.

These are not your run-of-the-mill Che Guevara idealists, liberationist "Vietcong" or even the diabolical Khmer Rouges. Nor are they "traditionalists" by any stretch of the imagination. Yet, theirs is the same vicious ideology that is broadcast daily and prayer-like across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Slowly Awakening

Western politicians and media are only now awakening to Saudi Arabia's sickly obsession, since the 1980s, with cleansing Islam of its Shi'a Muslim populations. Although this is integral to Saudi foreign policy, there is an interesting element of skullduggery to the whole affair.

The Saudis have been playing the anti-Shi'a card in secret league with the "Jewish State," as Middle East specialists today can vouch. It was in "secret" only because nearly every Middle Easterner regards Israel as little more than a foreign colony.

Anti-Shi'ism provides the Saudis with a temporary respite. After Iran's revolution, the Saudis rose to the occasion and helped bankroll Iraq's Saddam Hussein when his war against Iran began to falter. Besides trying to drown Iran in blood, and despite Iran's untold military and civilian casualties and thousands of victims of chemical weapons from the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, the Saudis figure that a nice Sunni-Shi'a conflict may now pay better dividends.

It might even induce Israel to make a few minor concessions to the weak Palestinians and settle the whole "irritating" problem of Palestine. Miscalculating, the Saudis remain dogged in their "secret" alliance with Israel.

But the European Union too had been making its calculations, given the dimming prospects of an Israeli-Palestinian peace after several initiatives by Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama turned into foreign-policy fiascos. With Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's ongoing feud with Obama, the West seems to have no idea how to deal with Israel's unending subjugation of the Palestinians.

But it is the United States that faces the starkest of choices. One is to support the Saudi-Israeli rampage across the Middle East and risk the region's social and political collapse as well as a final military conflagration. Or, beat a hasty retreat and let the people of Iran find their natural, rightful place in a part of the world they have inhabited continuously for at least 5,000 years, before the Western colonialism and its aftermath blew everything apart.

Sadly, the Western plan on paper has been, yesterday as it is today, to carve the Middle East up into ethno-religious enclaves. The only conceivable reasoning for this is the forlorn hope that that it will somehow confer at least short-term "legitimacy" on the idea of a "Jewish State," as Israel leaders stridently demand.

King Salman needs the Sunni-Shia conflict more than ever, too, just to perpetuate the waning rule of his dynasty and the aberrant social conditions of his subjects. Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism has rotted away society to the core, just as it has everywhere else it has taken root.

Dr. In'am al-Rabu'i, the president of children's studies at the Armed Forces Hospital in Jeddah, warns that the country suffers from widespread sexual ailments. This has been known for some time. But a recent study has shown that a whopping 23 percent of all Saudi children have been raped at least once, mostly within families.

This is a country whose vitality has been sapped, yet it sits atop an ocean of oil. That the world economy depends on this oil should not give terrorism carte blanche.

One is hard-pressed to see how the West could be allies at all with a government which couldn't be bothered to hide its terrorist connections anymore. It is patently wrong to ascribe the Saudi present animosities toward Iran to "ancient religious disputes," much less throw the blame equally on all parties and lay back to watch the fireworks.

Anthony F. Shaker, PhD is a Middle East specialist and a visiting scholar at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University. He has authored numerous articles on strategic affairs, as well as academic books and papers on the history of Islam.
