

Behind the Saudi Troublemaking

Saudi Arabia's monarchy is bombing Yemen, locking up domestic rivals and stirring up trouble in Lebanon, while a slow-burning confrontation continues against Qatar which could split the Gulf Cooperation Council, says Paul Cochrane.

By Paul Cochrane

Five months after the diplomatic spat between the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet and Qatar kicked off, the ante is being upped. Bahrain – one of the quartet alongside Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt – has called for Qatar to be frozen out of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As the council starts to unravel, what will this mean for Qatar and the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region?

The Bahraini proposal, which would have been coordinated with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, to lock Qatar out of the GCC is a logical move in the nearly six-month-long siege, with the next potential step the removal of Qatar from the Council altogether.

This unprecedented inter-GCC crisis has led to the biggest divisions within the Council – which consists of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman – since it was formed in 1981.

Qatar leaving the Gulf monarchical club would seriously loosen the threads that bind the GCC together, as the original idea of the Council was proposed by Saudi Arabia as a security pact to make sure any challenges to their respective thrones were quashed. Ironically it was the threat of Islamic extremism that prompted the creation of the GCC, and it is the Anti-Terror Quarter (ATQ) accusing Qatar of funding terrorist groups that is driving the GCC apart.

The spur to form the GCC was the siege of Mecca by radical Saudi Islamists in November 1979. It shook the kingdom to its core for two weeks and nearly lost the Saudis the much coveted, and much abused, title of the “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” To deal with the domestic threat, Riyadh encouraged Islamists to go and fight with the Afghan mujahedeen following the Soviet invasion in December 1979. We all know how that ended: Al Qaeda and its offshoots, 9/11, and blowback for the Middle East and much of the world.

Internal power jockeying among royal family members aside (for instance the Qatari Emir's father, Hamad, deposed his father, as did Oman's Sultan Qaboos), the only time the GCC has acted in each other's defense was not the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait in 1991, but the Bahraini uprising in 2011.

Bahrain's rulers, the Khalifas, might have been dethroned by the mass unrest – the royal family is Sunni, which accounts for around 20 percent of the population, the remainder Shia – without GCC military intervention.

It was a brutal and blatant example of how far the GCC will go to ensure its self-preservation. At the same time it brought Bahrain even more into the Saudi camp amid the inter-GCC rivalry to be the leader of the Council.

Traditionally it has been Abu Dhabi and Riyadh jockeying for top position, evidenced in neither capital willing to capitulate to the other over the proposed location of a GCC Central Bank when a Gulf Common Market (GCM) was being mooted in 2008.

But the Arab Spring brought the two closer together in the face of a common enemy: populist uprisings. The relationship has been further cemented by the close ties of the young bucks Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ).

Qatar however did not follow the GCC line, reflecting its assertive foreign policy over the previous decade to steer its own course. This culminated in the UAE, Saudi and Bahrain recalling their ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014 (they did not return until November 2014).

Simmering Tensions

Tensions were ironed out yet not fully resolved, which pointed out some crucial problems within the GCC itself: no framework governing relationships between members, no mechanisms to resolve member disputes, and no GCC court or framework to follow up and back GCC resolutions.

In addition to the lack of such frameworks, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi lacked any leverage over Qatar. With Qatar having a small populace of 350,000 and one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world, Riyadh cannot use checkbook diplomacy as it did with the UAE's Sharjah in the 1970s, when the penniless emirate was bailed out by Riyadh in return for greater say in Sharjah's internal policies, which extended to banning alcohol.

Neither is an uprising in Qatar likely due to its citizens' wealth, but also the lack of different sects with any grievances that could be externally exploited – the majority are Sunni, of the Wahhabi school, the same as Saudi Arabia – although Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have tried to capitalize this year on tribal divisions to overthrow the Emir. Saudi and the Emirates instead had to resort to info-wars to try and bring Qatar to heel.

The Gulf crisis was sparked in May (2017) by the UAE government hacking Qatari government news and social media sites to plant false statements by the Qatari Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The most damning false statement was that the Emir respected the Iranian government – the arch nemesis of the Sunni Gulf monarchies, especially Riyadh. After all, a second core reason for the GCC's creation was the Iranian revolution, and the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.

News of the UAE's hack only came out in July, weeks after the ATQ had cut diplomatic, transport and trade ties with Qatar. The ATQ's top accusation? Qatar was financing terrorism, sailing too close to the wind with Iran, and pursuing too independent a foreign policy for the ATQ's liking.

The ATQ, which includes GCC-outsider Egypt, has used all the means at its disposal bar military action to try to isolate Qatar. Kuwait has been acting as a moderator between the two sides, while the Sultanate of Oman is trying to sit on the fence. The Sultanate however is on good terms with Tehran, and has allowed Qatari planes and ships through its territories to circumnavigate the UAE's blockade of its territorial waters and airspace. Muscat is effectively distancing itself from the Saudi-UAE dominated GCC.

The split has pushed Qatar further into the arms of the Turks, with whom they have a military pact, and the Iranians; both countries are now major providers of food and other goods to Qatar. Turkey is a crucial ally as it is pro-Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Arab moderate Islamic party; Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP party has championed the Brotherhood while Qatar has allowed both the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliate, Palestine's Hamas, to operate out of Doha, much to the ATQ's chagrin.

The Gulf monarchies have long opposed populist Islamic parties – if the monarchies could not have some sway over them – fearing any threat to autocratic rule by organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood that have broad appeal with moderate and middle-class Muslims.

Hence Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when it came to power in the wake of the 2011 uprising in Egypt, and supported the 2013 coup by the Egyptian military, which has banned the Muslim Brotherhood, locked up some 60,000 political prisoners, and imprisoned the former president, Mohamed Morsi.

The ATQ has followed Cairo's lead by designating the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. It has not stopped there. The UAE has listed 82 organizations it deems terrorists, while the ATQ has published a list of 30 organizations it wants Qatar to expel and stop funding.

A Divergent Approach

With Qatar being a host for Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and, for a spell, the Taliban, they have joined as an outlying member the “Axis of Resistance,” a term spawned following George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech in 2002, to denote the anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. alliance between Iran, Syria and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

The analogy is not quite right though in that Qatar opposed the Syrian regime, gets on with Washington, and is not ideologically nor theologically on the side of Shia Iran or Hezbollah. Instead we have a new, loosely linked axis comprised of Qatar, Iran and Turkey that opposes the Saudi-UAE-led GCC. It is no longer an ascendant “Shia Crescent” pitted against the Sunni Arab states as Jordan’s King Abdullah warned of back in 2004, but a more diverse bloc.

What is clear is that a major cleavage has occurred in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, and that there is no turning back by the ATQ or Qatar to resolve the GCC crisis; there has been too much water under the proverbial bridge between the two camps, and the info-war has been both harsh and personal.

The ATQ’s blockade strategy has not worked, as following the 2014 diplomatic spat Qatar prepared contingency plans to weather a potential siege, which the ATQ was seemingly unaware of. The crisis has also caused the Qataris to rally around the flag.

The ATQ is now trying to strip Qatar of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and has compiled dossiers about Doha’s terrorist financing, although it has not released its “black book” over fears Doha will expose the ATQ’s, especially Saudi Arabia’s, involvement with questionable groups (a case of the kettle calling the pot black) despite Mohammad bin Salman’s public statements to “return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam.”

At present, the ATQ is running out of other options other than a complete divorce if the crisis continues. The step after a Qatar GCC exit, a ‘Qatexit’? Saudi intervention according to analysts, especially if Mohammad bin Salman’s reform plans and Vision 2030 to diversify the economy away from hydrocarbons does not pan out, and the kingdom becomes increasingly cash-strapped due to low oil prices.

Theodore Karasik, a senior adviser at Washington D.C.-based consultancy Gulf State Analytics, posits that Qatar could be brought under Saudi Arabia’s umbrella by force to seize the country’s huge gas reserves, the third largest in the world.

Who knows, black swan events do occur, and the global powers would vocally oppose such a move but likely not exercise military intervention a la 1991 when

Iraq invaded Kuwait. The U.S. troops based in Qatar would just stay in their base; the Trump administration has signaled it has sided with Riyadh, even though the State Department has been more nuanced towards Doha. As for the Turks and the Iranians, they would not want to be brought into a conflagration with Riyadh and the ATQ. That really would tear the MENA apart.

Ultimately, there's not much to stop a Saudi gas grab. There's not much desire internationally for yet another Middle Eastern military "adventure" following the debacles in Iraq and Libya, while nobody's lifted a finger against Saudi Arabia for its war against Yemen. As long as Qatari gas exports remain uninterrupted, the global powers might readily accept a change of management.

That said, such a Saudi move may be far-fetched, but a new GCC without Qatar seems increasingly likely.

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Rex Tillerson's Trials and Tribulations

President Trump's meddling hand in the Mideast encouraged the Saudi-Qatari showdown and made Secretary of State Tillerson's job all the more nettlesome, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will stay in his job no more than two years, maximum. He is an honorable man who came to Washington with a patriotic sense of wanting to do something on behalf of his country. There is no reason to expect that he will be caught up in sleaze found elsewhere in the administration. His previous career demonstrated he has management and leadership ability, while giving him much experience in conducting business overseas. But the frustrations of his current position will be too much for him to bear for very long.

Some of those frustrations emanate from the nature of the Trump presidency. This administration simply has little place for diplomacy, notwithstanding how

much the President likes to talk about making deals. The proposed meat-ax cuts to the State Department are one of the most obvious indications of that. Another indication is how the nation's chief diplomat, the Secretary of State, often seems to be left outside the innermost circle of foreign policy decision-making.

A related source of frustration is a President working at cross-purposes with some of what Tillerson is trying to do. This is not unique to the business of the State Department, and the Secretary of State is hardly the only one of the President's senior subordinates whom Trump has undercut. But probably the most salient example of such undercutting is how Trump's steep tilt toward the Saudis has complicated Tillerson's efforts at resolving the conflict between Qatar and its Gulf Arab rivals.

There is also the discomfort of a Secretary of State having to defend the indefensible, on matters such as climate change and trade. And Tillerson has to do so at a time when foreign trust in the United States to do the right thing in world affairs is at a nadir.

Other difficulties for Tillerson have more to do with the differences between his business experience and government, although some of these difficulties are exacerbated by tendencies of the Trump administration. As CEO of Exxon Mobil, Tillerson was fully in charge. He is not in charge now, and not just in the sense that he reports to the President. There are multiple political and policy interests that present complexities he did not have to confront as a business executive.

Although a corporate CEO does have to deal in a sense with multiple constituencies in the form of shareholders, customers, suppliers, and creditors, that array is standard in a way that can be described in a business textbook. The Washington policy environment is different from anything else, and it certainly cannot be simplified in terms of dollars and rates of return.

The Turnover Troubles

The quadrennial cycle of administrations coming and going is another Washington phenomenon that has made Tillerson's job harder and does not correspond to anything in his business career. Tillerson has been criticized for seeming to give greater priority to developing a reorganization plan for the State Department than to filling vacant positions on the existing organization chart.

But this approach would be a normal and appropriate way for a new chief executive of a corporation to approach his task. Why appoint someone to a job that may soon be redefined or abolished? The difference is that Exxon Mobil never had to deal with its upper ranks being depopulated every four

years. Tillerson's filling of State Department vacancies has been greatly complicated by the heavy hand of a White House that applies political litmus tests and makes sure no never-Trumpers get a job. Tillerson has considered this White House role to be such an impediment that he uncharacteristically lost his composure by shouting at the White House personnel chief about the problem.

Then there are the many clashes of foreign interests that a Secretary of State must deal with, that will not go away, and that cannot simply be ignored. Unlike in the business world, where failure to strike a deal means turning to some other oilfield to exploit, such options are often not available in foreign policy.

Tillerson has just made his most salient personal foray yet into international problem-solving – shuttle diplomacy to try to resolve the dispute among the Gulf Arabs – and he is coming home empty-handed. At the end of his trip, Tillerson not only declared how “tired” he was but also made very explicit comments about how different such work was from being CEO of Exxon Mobil and how difficult it was in having to deal with “fragmented” decision-making in the U.S. Government. Meanwhile, the Gulf Arab dispute is still a problem for the administration's foreign policy.

Earlier on the trip, Tillerson stopped in Turkey to accept a lifetime achievement award from the World Petroleum Council. In his remarks to the oil executives, Tillerson said, “I miss all of you. I miss you as colleagues, I miss you as partners, I miss you as competitors, I miss the healthy debates, the collaboration, the breakthroughs that were achieved.”

Against the backdrop of his current job – with the unhealthy debates, the highly imperfect collaboration, and the failures in achieving breakthroughs – those words were undoubtedly sincere and strongly felt.

Tillerson will not go back to being an oil executive, and his Washington experience will make him feel he deserves a retirement more than ever. He probably already is counting the days until he has spent just enough time in his current job to make a graceful withdrawal.

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How Trump Risks a Saudi-Qatar War

Exclusive: President Trump's swaggering response to Saudi threats against Qatar could be viewed as a "green light" for a Saudi invasion – and the next step toward a regional war with Iran, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

The split inside the Trump administration over how to deal with the Qatar crisis has opened a dangerous situation that could soon lead to armed conflict.

The State and Defense Departments have largely sided with Qatar, but the White House has undermined the leverage the U.S. has over Saudi Arabia to rein in Riyadh's aggressive behavior towards its neighbor. President Donald Trump, for instance, last week called Qatar "a major sponsor" of terrorism, ignoring that Saudi Arabia is a big supporter, too.

Tension between Qatar – with its independent foreign policy – and Saudi Arabia – with its allies United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt – has been building for years. Earlier in June, the four nations imposed an economic blockade on Qatar and cut diplomatic ties. They closed their airspace to Qatar Airways. Food imports, on which Qatar depends, were blocked at the country's only land border, which is with Saudi Arabia.

After U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged an end to the economic embargo and called on the Saudis to make "reasonable" proposals, Riyadh on Friday released a list of 13 demands, designed to be rejected by Doha. Saudi Arabia laid down a 10-day deadline for Qatar to respond by July 7. The Saudis did not say what would happen next, but the signs are ominous.

Qatar has already rejected the demands as unrealistic. Among them is for Qatar to break all ties with Iran, to stop supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and to shut down the Al Jazeera television network. The Brotherhood seeks to institute an Islamist agenda through the ballot box, a threat to the monarchist Saudis and their Egyptian clients. Al Jazeera's broadcasting helped stir up popular revolt during the failed Arab Spring, another threat to Saudi rule.

Further, if Riyadh intends to go to war with its regional rival, Shi'ite Iran, it needs U.S. support. The largest U.S. military base in the Middle East is in Qatar, which would have to be on board for an attack.

A Green Light

In Syria and Afghanistan, Trump has left decisions largely up to the military,

rendering many of his tweets and statements irrelevant. But Trump is asserting himself in the Gulf crisis. He even tried to take credit for the embargo after his visit to Riyadh last month, where he also met the Qatari emir. While the Pentagon and the State Department want a mediated settlement, White House spokesman Sean Spicer said on Friday the crisis should be left up to the participants to solve.

“The four countries that are part of that – we believe it’s a family issue and that they should work [it] out,” Spicer said. “If we can help facilitate those discussions then so be it,” he said. “They want to, and should work [it] out for themselves.”

Spicer’s remark reminded Ali al-Ahmed, director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington, of the George H.W. Bush administration’s ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, telling Saddam Hussein in 1990 that the U.S. had “no opinion on inter-Arab disputes, such as your border disagreement with Kuwait.” Eight days later Saddam invaded Kuwait.

Al-Ahmed thinks Spicer’s remark is similarly a sign that Trump has given Riyadh a green light to invade Qatar. He said the elevation last week of Mohammed bin-Salman to Saudi Crown Prince is another ominous sign. Bin-Salman, who has shown his aggressiveness as defense minister with a two-year, open-ended disastrous attack on neighboring Yemen, replaced Muhammad bin Nayef, who was “seen as too close to Qatar, and had to be pushed out,” al-Ahmed told me.

Bin-Salman will want to consolidate his power in his new position the way he did when he was named defense minister, by launching a war, al-Ahmed said. He drew another parallel with Saddam Hussein who invaded Iran a year after he came to power to shore up his authority, with U.S. support that time too.

The stalemated war in Yemen has drained the Saudi treasury. So there is also the matter of seizing control of Qatar’s supply of natural gas, the world’s third largest, through a puppet regime that Riyadh would seek to install in Doha, al-Ahmed said.

Fearing a Larger Conflict

Given the dangers involved, instead of staying out of it, the White House should send an unequivocal message, al-Ahmed said.

“The U.S. should make clear that the use of violence against another nation is not acceptable and will have consequences,” he said. With the leverage Washington has, “I think if the U.S. really wanted this resolved, it can achieve it easily.”

Giorgio Cafiero, chief executive of Gulf State Analytics in Washington, told me that the U.S. should benefit by resolving the Gulf crisis.

“Unquestionably, it serves Washington’s interests to see its Sunni Arab allies maintain a semblance of unity and cohesion, thus this rift represents a major problem for the U.S. and its foreign policy in the Gulf region,” Cafiero said.

With the U.S. largely butting out, Kuwait has been leading an effort for the Gulf Cooperation Council to solve the crisis without outside help. With its “mixed messages” on the crisis, Washington “appears to be in a relatively weak position to facilitate a restoration of diplomatic and economic relations between the involved states,” Cafiero said.

And that could only spell danger. “The longer this stalemate prolongs, the more politically costly it will be for either side to back down,” Cafiero said. “In the event that Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s pressure on Qatar fails to achieve Riyadh and Abu Dhabi’s goals, there are risks of escalating tensions.”

“A military confrontation cannot be dismissed as a possible outcome of diplomatic failures to resolve the row, ” Cafiero said. But that may indeed be what Trump wants and why he seems to want no part in solving the crisis.

If Trump wanted the U.S. to act like a Great Power he would go even a step further to use American leverage to force an accommodation between the Saudis and the Iranians. Their rivalry has impacted conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Afghanistan and now Qatar too.

In May, bin-Salman threatened to directly attack Iran and Iran returned the threat. The Saudis and Iranians blame each other as aggressors. But neither is going anywhere. A balance of power is needed to bring stability to the region.

Instead of facilitating this, Trump is lowering the U.S. to the level of the sectarian combatants, openly siding with Sunni Riyadh while threatening Iran, thus risking an even larger regional war. A U.S. green light to invade Qatar could well be the prelude to an attack on Iran.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani told the Qatari emir in a phone call on Sunday that “Tehran will stand by Qatar’s government” and that the “siege of Qatar is not acceptable for us,” said the website of Rouhani’s office. “Iran’s air space, ground and sea will be always be open to Qatar as a ... friendly nation,” said Rouhani, adding that “pressure, threats and sanctions” are not the way to resolve the crisis.

If the Saudis do indeed invade Qatar, al-Ahmed believes U.S. troops stationed in Qatar would secure infrastructure in Doha but would otherwise not stand in the

way. Doha might not be able to rely on a contingent of Turkish forces that have been rushed to Qatar, he said, because the Turkish troops deployed do not have the heavy weapons needed to repel an invasion. The Qatar military can succeed in defending its country only if the population fights with them, said al-Ahmed.

“The Qataris should start arming every man now,” he said.

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How America Armed Terrorists in Syria

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard’s “Stop Arming Terrorists Act” to curb weapons going to Al Qaeda-linked jihadists in Syria, has attracted only 14 co-sponsors pointing to hypocrisy in the “war on terror,” as Gareth Porter explained at The American Conservative.

By Gareth Porter

Three-term Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, a member of both the Armed Services and Foreign Affairs committees, has proposed legislation that would prohibit any U.S. assistance to terrorist organizations in Syria as well as to any organization working directly with them. Equally important, it would prohibit U.S. military sales and other forms of military cooperation with other countries that provide arms or financing to those terrorists and their collaborators.

Gabbard’s “Stop Arming Terrorists Act” challenges for the first time in Congress a U.S. policy toward the conflict in the Syrian civil war that should have set off alarm bells long ago: in 2012-13 the Obama administration helped its Sunni allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar provide arms to Syrian and non-Syrian armed groups to force President Bashar al-Assad out of power. And in 2013 the administration began to provide arms to what the CIA judged to be “relatively moderate” anti-Assad groups – meaning they incorporated various degrees of Islamic extremism.

That policy, ostensibly aimed at helping replace the Assad regime with a more democratic alternative, has actually helped build up al Qaeda’s Syrian franchise

al Nusra Front into the dominant threat to Assad.

The supporters of this arms-supply policy believe it is necessary as pushback against Iranian influence in Syria. But that argument skirts the real issue raised by the policy's history. The Obama administration's Syria policy effectively sold out the U.S. interest that was supposed to be the touchstone of the "Global War on Terrorism" – the eradication of al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates. The United States has instead subordinated that U.S. interest in counter-terrorism to the interests of its Sunni allies. In doing so it has helped create a new terrorist threat in the heart of the Middle East.

The policy of arming military groups committed to overthrowing the government of President Bashar al-Assad began in September 2011, when President Barack Obama was pressed by his Sunni allies – Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – to supply heavy weapons to a military opposition to Assad they were determined to establish. Turkey and the Gulf regimes wanted the United States to provide anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons to the rebels, according to a former Obama administration official involved in Middle East issues.

Obama refused to provide arms to the opposition, but he agreed to provide covert U.S. logistical help in carrying out a campaign of military assistance to arm opposition groups. CIA involvement in the arming of anti-Assad forces began with arranging for the shipment of weapons from the stocks of the Gaddafi regime that had been stored in Benghazi.

Shipments from Benghazi

CIA-controlled firms shipped the weapons from the military port of Benghazi to two small ports in Syria using former U.S. military personnel to manage the logistics, as investigative reporter Sy Hersh detailed in 2014. The funding for the program came mainly from the Saudis.

A declassified October 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency report revealed that the shipment in late August 2012 had included 500 sniper rifles, 100 RPG (rocket propelled grenade launchers) along with 300 RPG rounds and 400 howitzers. Each arms shipment encompassed as many as ten shipping containers, it reported, each of which held about 48,000 pounds of cargo.

That suggests a total payload of up to 250 tons of weapons per shipment. Even if the CIA had organized only one shipment per month, the arms shipments would have totaled 2,750 tons of arms bound ultimately for Syria from October 2011 through August 2012. More likely it was a multiple of that figure.

The CIA's covert arms shipments from Libya came to an abrupt halt in September 2012 when Libyan militants attacked and burned the embassy annex in Benghazi

that had been used to support the operation. By then, however, a much larger channel for arming anti-government forces was opening up.

The CIA put the Saudis in touch with a senior Croatian official who had offered to sell large quantities of arms left over from the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. And the CIA helped them shop for weapons from arms dealers and governments in several other former Soviet bloc countries.

Flush with weapons acquired from both the CIA's Libya program and from the Croatians, the Saudis and Qataris dramatically increased the number of flights by military cargo planes to Turkey in December 2012 and continued that intensive pace for the next two and a half months.

The *New York Times* reported a total 160 such flights through mid-March 2013. The most common cargo plane in use in the Gulf, the Ilyushin IL-76, can carry roughly 50 tons of cargo on a flight, which would indicate that as much as 8,000 tons of weapons poured across the Turkish border into Syria just in late 2012 and in 2013.

One U.S. official called the new level of arms deliveries to Syrian rebels a "cataract of weaponry." And a year-long investigation by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project revealed that the Saudis were intent on building up a powerful conventional army in Syria.

A Flood of Weapons

The "end-use certificate" for weapons purchased from an arms company in Belgrade, Serbia, in May 2013 includes 500 Soviet-designed PG-7VR rocket launchers that can penetrate even heavily-armored tanks, along with two million rounds; 50 Konkurs anti-tank missile launchers and 500 missiles, 50 anti-aircraft guns mounted on armored vehicles, 10,000 fragmentation rounds for OG-7 rocket launchers capable of piercing heavy body armor; four truck-mounted BM-21 GRAD multiple rocket launchers, each of which fires 40 rockets at a time with a range of 12 to 19 miles, along with 20,000 GRAD rockets.

The end-user document for another Saudi order from the same Serbian company listed 300 tanks, 2,000 RPG launchers, and 16,500 other rocket launchers, one million rounds for ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns, and 315 million cartridges for various other guns.

Those two purchases were only a fraction of the totality of the arms obtained by the Saudis over the next few years from eight Balkan nations. Investigators found that the Saudis made their biggest arms deals with former Soviet bloc states in 2015, and that the weapons included many that had just come off

factory production lines.

Nearly 40 percent of the arms the Saudis purchased from those countries, moreover, still had not been delivered by early 2017. So the Saudis had already contracted for enough weaponry to keep a large-scale conventional war in Syria going for several more years.

By far the most consequential single Saudi arms purchase was not from the Balkans, however, but from the United States. It was the December 2013 U.S. sale of 15,000 TOW anti-tank missiles to the Saudis at a cost of about \$1 billion – the result of Obama’s decision earlier that year to reverse his ban on lethal assistance to anti-Assad armed groups.

The Saudis had agreed, moreover, that those anti-tank missiles would be doled out to Syrian groups only at U.S. discretion. The TOW missiles began to arrive in Syria in 2014 and soon had a major impact on the military balance.

This flood of weapons into Syria, along with the entry of 20,000 foreign fighters into the country – primarily through Turkey – largely defined the nature of the conflict. These armaments helped make al Qaeda’s Syrian franchise, al Nusra Front (now renamed Tahrir al-Sham or Levant Liberation Organization) and its close allies by far the most powerful anti-Assad forces in Syria – and gave rise to the Islamic State.

Al Qaeda’s Benefit

By late 2012, it became clear to U.S. officials that the largest share of the arms that began flowing into Syria early in the year were going to the rapidly growing al Qaeda presence in the country. In October 2012, U.S. officials acknowledged off the record for the first time to the *New York Times* that “most” of the arms that had been shipped to armed opposition groups in Syria with U.S. logistical assistance during the previous year had gone to “hardline Islamic jihadists” – obviously meaning al Qaeda’s Syrian franchise, al Nusra.

Al Nusra Front and its allies became the main recipients of the weapons because the Saudis, Turks, and Qataris wanted the arms to go to the military units that were most successful in attacking government targets. And by the summer of 2012, al Nusra Front, buttressed by the thousands of foreign jihadists pouring into the country across the Turkish border, was already taking the lead in attacks on the Syrian government in coordination with “Free Syrian Army” brigades.

In November and December 2012, al Nusra Front began establishing formal “joint operations rooms” with those calling themselves “Free Syrian Army” on several battlefronts, as Charles Lister chronicles in his book *The Syrian Jihad*. One such commander favored by Washington was Col. Abdul Jabbar al-Oqaidi, a former

Syrian army officer who headed something called the Aleppo Revolutionary Military Council. Ambassador Robert Ford, who continued to hold that position even after he had been withdrawn from Syria, publicly visited Oqaidi in May 2013 to express U.S. support for him and the FSA.

But Oqaidi and his troops were junior partners in a coalition in Aleppo in which al Nusra was by far the strongest element. That reality is clearly reflected in a video in which Oqaidi describes his good relations with officials of the "Islamic State" and is shown joining the main jihadist commander in the Aleppo region celebrating the capture of the Syrian government's Menagh Air Base in September 2013.

By early 2013, in fact, the "Free Syrian Army," which had never actually been a military organization with any troops, had ceased to have any real significance in the Syria conflict. New anti-Assad armed groups had stopped using the name even as a "brand" to identify themselves, as a leading specialist on the conflict observed.

The 'Moderate' Fiction

So, when weapons from Turkey arrived at the various battlefronts, it was understood by all the non-jihadist groups that they would be shared with al Nusra Front and its close allies. A report by McClatchy in early 2013, on a town in north central Syria, showed how the military arrangements between al Nusra and those brigades calling themselves "Free Syrian Army" governed the distribution of weapons.

One of those units, the Victory Brigade, had participated in a "joint operations room" with al Qaeda's most important military ally, Ahrar al Sham, in a successful attack on a strategic town a few weeks earlier. A visiting reporter watched that brigade and Ahrar al Sham show off new sophisticated weapons that included Russian-made RPG27 shoulder-fired rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades and RG6 grenade launchers.

When asked if the Victory Brigade had shared its new weapons with Ahrar al Sham, the latter's spokesman responded, "Of course they share their weapons with us. We fight together."

Turkey and Qatar consciously chose al Qaeda and its closest ally, Ahrar al Sham, as the recipients of weapons systems. In late 2013 and early 2014, several truckloads of arms bound for the province of Hatay, just south of the Turkish border, were intercepted by Turkish police. They had Turkish intelligence personnel on board, according to later Turkish police court testimony.

The province was controlled by Ahrar al Sham. In fact Turkey soon began to treat

Ahrar al Sham as its primary client in Syria, according to Faysal Itani, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.

A Qatari intelligence operative who had been involved in shipping arms to extremist groups in Libya was a key figure in directing the flow of arms from Turkey into Syria. An Arab intelligence source familiar with the discussions among the external suppliers near the Syrian border in Turkey during those years told the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius that when one of the participants warned that the outside powers were building up the jihadists while the non-Islamist groups were withering away, the Qatari operative responded, "I will send weapons to al Qaeda if it will help."

The Qataris did funnel arms to both al Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham, according to a Middle Eastern diplomatic source. The Obama administration's National Security Council staff proposed in 2013 that the United States signal U.S. displeasure with Qatar over its arming of extremists in both Syria and Libya by withdrawing a squadron of fighter planes from the U.S. airbase at al-Udeid, Qatar. The Pentagon vetoed that mild form of pressure, however, to protect its access to its bases in Qatar.

Turkey's Game

President Obama himself confronted Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan over his government's support for the jihadists at a private White House dinner in May 2013, as recounted by Hersh. "We know what you're doing with the radicals in Syria," he quotes Obama as saying to Erdogan.

The administration addressed Turkey's cooperation with the al Nusra publicly, however, only fleetingly in late 2014. Shortly after leaving Ankara, Francis Ricciardone, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey from 2011 through mid-2014, told *The Daily Telegraph* of London that Turkey had "worked with groups, frankly, for a period, including al Nusra."

The closest Washington came to a public reprimand of its allies over the arming of terrorists in Syria was when Vice President Joe Biden criticized their role in October 2014. In impromptu remarks at Harvard University's Kennedy School, Biden complained that "our biggest problem is our allies." The forces they had supplied with arms, he said, were "al Nusra and al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world."

Biden quickly apologized for the remarks, explaining that he didn't mean that U.S. allies had deliberately helped the jihadists. But Ambassador Ford confirmed his complaint, telling BBC, "What Biden said about the allies aggravating the problem of extremism is true."

In June 2013, Obama approved the first direct U.S. lethal military aid to rebel brigades that had been vetted by the CIA. By spring 2014, the U.S.-made BGM-71E anti-tank missiles from the 15,000 transferred to the Saudis began to appear in the hands of selected anti-Assad groups. But the CIA imposed the condition that the group receiving them would not cooperate with the al Nusra Front or its allies.

That condition implied that Washington was supplying military groups that were strong enough to maintain their independence from al Nusra Front. But the groups on the CIA's list of vetted "relatively moderate" armed groups were all highly vulnerable to takeover by the al Qaeda affiliate.

In November 2014, al Nusra Front troops struck the two strongest CIA-supported armed groups, Harakat Hazm and the Syrian Revolutionary Front on successive days and seized their heavy weapons, including both TOW anti-tank missiles and GRAD rockets.

In early March 2015, the Harakat Hazm Aleppo branch dissolved itself, and al Nusra Front promptly showed off photos of the TOW missiles and other equipment they had captured from it. And in March 2016, al Nusra Front troops attacked the headquarters of the 13th Division in northwestern Idlib province and seized all of its TOW missiles. Later that month, al Nusra Front released a video of its troops using the TOW missiles it had captured.

CIA's Largesse

But that wasn't the only way for al Nusra Front to benefit from the CIA's largesse. Along with its close ally Ahrar al Sham, the terrorist organization began planning for a campaign to take complete control of Idlib province in the winter of 2014-15.

Abandoning any pretense of distance from al Qaeda, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar worked with al Nusra on the creation of a new military formation for Idlib called the "Army of Conquest," consisting of the al Qaeda affiliate and its closest allies. Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided more weapons for the campaign, while Turkey facilitated their passage. On March 28, just four days after launching the campaign, the Army of Conquest successfully gained control of Idlib City.

The non-jihadist armed groups getting advanced weapons from the CIA assistance were not part of the initial assault on Idlib City. After the capture of Idlib the U.S.-led operations room for Syria in southern Turkey signaled to the CIA-supported groups in Idlib that they could now participate in the campaign to consolidate control over the rest of the province.

According to Lister, the British researcher on jihadists in Syria who maintains contacts with both jihadist and other armed groups, recipients of CIA weapons, such as the Fursan al haq brigade and Division 13, did join the Idlib campaign alongside al Nusra Front without any move by the CIA to cut them off.

As the Idlib offensive began, the CIA-supported groups were getting TOW missiles in larger numbers, and they now used them with great effectiveness against the Syrian army tanks. That was the beginning of a new phase of the war, in which U.S. policy was to support an alliance between “relatively moderate” groups and the al Nusra Front.

The new alliance was carried over to Aleppo, where jihadist groups close to Nusra Front formed a new command called Fateh Halab (“Aleppo Conquest”) with nine armed groups in Aleppo province, which were getting CIA assistance. The CIA-supported groups could claim that they weren’t cooperating with al Nusra Front because the al Qaeda franchise was not officially on the list of participants in the command. But as the report on the new command clearly implied, this was merely a way of allowing the CIA to continue providing weapons to its clients, despite their de facto alliance with al Qaeda.

The significance of all this is clear: by helping its Sunni allies provide weapons to al Nusra Front and its allies and by funneling into the war zone sophisticated weapons that were bound to fall into al Nusra hands or strengthen their overall military position, U.S. policy has been largely responsible for having extended al Qaeda’s power across a significant part of Syrian territory.

The CIA and the Pentagon appear to be ready to tolerate such a betrayal of America’s stated counter-terrorism mission. Unless either Congress or the White House confronts that betrayal explicitly, as Tulsi Gabbard’s legislation would force them to do, U.S. policy will continue to be complicit in the consolidation of power by al Qaeda in Syria, even if the Islamic State is defeated there.

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[This article originally appeared at The American Conservative, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-america-armed-terrorists-in-syria/>]

Trump Fans the Mideast Fires of Hate

President Trump's support for the Saudi blockade of Qatar – and his insult to Iran after it suffered an ISIS attack – reveal a dangerously shallow thinker eager to pour gas on the Mideast fires, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

That “Arab NATO” didn't last very long, did it? The break with Qatar by some of its Arab brethren, including its nearest neighbors, is impressively comprehensive, involving a breach of diplomatic relations and an economic and transportation embargo. It reflects sharp divisions not only within the Arab world but even among the half dozen monarchies that constitute the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The break is a resounding refutation of the notion, which was a leitmotif of President Trump's recent trip to the region, that significant lines of conflict in the region can all be reduced to some simplistic grand division, such as of evil versus good, Shia versus Sunni, or Iran versus everyone else.

The ostensible complaint about Qatar's financing of extremists is grounded in truth about that financing but is an unpersuasive instance of the pot calling the kettle black, given the Saudis' own record in furnishing such support to radicals. The actual grievances that the Saudis and others have with the Qataris involve the sorts of parochial, ignoble concerns that the United States does not share and should not act as if it does.

Qatar's sponsorship of Al Jazeera has long been a thorn in the side of the Saudi rulers, who dislike freewheeling journalism that addresses subjects of interest to the Saudis. Then there was the way in which, back in the 1990s, the father of the current Qatari emir deposed *his* father, an action that senior Saudi royals saw as a disturbing precedent for ruling families in the region and led to the Saudis reportedly attempting to foment their own coup in Qatar.

Policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood are an additional issue. Certainly it is misleading to throw the Brotherhood rhetorically into the same hopper as the much different violent extremists that are the object of counterterrorist efforts. The Brotherhood has represented in most places in the region the principal peaceful Islamist alternative to the violent extremism of jihadists such as ISIS.

The Saudi royals have been wary of the Brotherhood because it represents a popular way of incorporating Islam into politics that is quite different from the monarchical absolutism of the royals themselves; the Brotherhood thus constitutes a threat to the religiously based legitimacy of the house of

Saud. Egyptian strongman Abdel Fatah al-Sisi opposes the Brotherhood because it represents a popular alternative to his increasingly harsh authoritarian rule; the democratically elected president whom al-Sisi deposed in a coup was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Punishing Pragmatism

For Qatar's rulers – even though they, like the Saudis, lead a very undemocratic and Wahhabi-based monarchy – dealing with the Brotherhood is a matter of recognizing social and political reality. Persian Gulf specialist Gerd Nonneman, of the Doha campus of Georgetown University, observes that Qatar's relationship with the Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations “was never driven by religious ideology but by a pragmatic calculation that these movements had considerable social traction and would likely become an important part of the post-Arab Spring era.”

Then there is Qatar's mostly normal relationship with Iran. This is the aspect of the intra-GCC dust-up that raises the most serious questions about the Trump administration's crudely simplistic way of defining lines of conflict in the region and in particular its automatic, nothing-but-confrontation-and-hostility posture toward Iran. Qatar has very practical reasons to conduct normal business with Iran. The two countries share the largest natural gas field in the world, a resource that is the key to Qatar's wealth and its status as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas. The two countries peacefully exploit this resource, competing in terms of economics and technology and not in terms of bullets or subversion.

To those who habitually recite the mantra about Iran's “nefarious” behavior in the region, isn't its behavior vis-à-vis Qatar and the gas exactly the kind of peaceful, normal, behavior we want to encourage? And if it is to be encouraged, shouldn't we all conduct ourselves the way the Qataris have in this respect?

Such conduct need not erase or overlook other differences or conflicts of interests. As Nonneman notes, Qatar's posture toward Iran is as pragmatic as its posture toward the Muslim Brotherhood; Qatar is strongly opposed to Iranian policies in Syria, for example, but sees no good to be done by any attempt to isolate Iran totally.

Iran's immediate response to the embargo of Qatar by its Arab brethren was to offer food exports to make up for commerce interrupted by Saudi Arabia closing its land border with Qatar. Would export of food be another example of that “nefarious,” “destabilizing” Iranian behavior we keep hearing about?

The Qatar experience raises another important point regarding conflict,

stability and Iran. As has been mentioned by many observers while Trump has continued sword-dancing with the Saudis and been castigating the Qataris, Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Persian Gulf region. If having normal relations with Iran does not preclude a country from hosting even a large U.S. military installation – and one in the *Persian* Gulf, in Iran's backyard, rather than, say, in the Gulf of Mexico – than why are we so afraid of anyone having normal relations with Iran, and are so vehement about trying to isolate Iran? Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the bankruptcy of a U.S. posture that assumes any dealings with, or activity of, Iran to be bad by definition.

An Appalling Statement

And nothing demonstrates the extremes to which the Trump administration goes in pushing its all-hostility-all-the-time policy toward Iran than the White House's appalling statement about the ISIS terrorist attacks in Tehran, which reads in its entirety, "We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times. We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote."

Shorten this by about a hundred characters and add some exclamation points, and this almost reads like one of those middle-of-the-night impulsive Trumpian tweets. It is all the more disturbing that this was instead an official White House statement, released by the press office – a reflection of how the extremes of current policy toward Iran are a function not just of Donald Trump's urges but also of personal grudges found elsewhere at high levels of his administration, a party-wide impulse to do the opposite of whatever Barack Obama did, and other comparably bad bases for constructing foreign and national security policy.

The "evil they promote" language turns upside down, of course, the whole story of ISIS and of how Iran has been a major foe, not a supporter, of that group and similar brands of terrorism. But the heartlessness and ignorance of the White House statement have implications beyond policy toward Iran. Just imagine what our own reaction would be if a similar "they had it coming" statement were made by any other government, in response to a terrorist attack by any group made against any other country. The reaction quite properly would be that the government making the statement was irresponsibly condoning terrorism.

For the United States to make such a statement subjects it to a very unfavorable comparison with Iran, which responsibly reacted with compassion and support following the most serious terrorist attack against the United States. Donald Trump likes to pose, as he tried to do during his recent trip to the region, as a leader in the fight against terrorism. Anyone who declares that the target of

an ISIS attack had it coming to them is not qualified to be such a leader.

Favoring Escalation

Everyone except hardline trouble-makers has an interest in de-escalation, rather than escalation, of tension and conflict in the Persian Gulf. Everyone includes the United States, the GCC countries, and the global economy. It is not just the leaders of Qatar who recognize that. Oman has carefully maintained smooth relations with all of its neighbors, including Iran, and for the most part Kuwait has tried to do so as well. That's half of the GCC. Even the Saudis, when they are not seized with shorter term preoccupations such as new leaders trying to make marks for themselves, have from time to time seen the value of rapprochement with Iran.

There has been an opportunity just within the past few months, based on a GCC proposal for dialogue that the Kuwaiti foreign minister carried to Tehran, for significant de-escalation of cross-Gulf tension. The proposal was well-received in Iran. President Rouhani, with a strengthened mandate after a landslide re-election victory, has expressed willingness to discuss without preconditions the full range of differences between Iran and the Gulf Arabs. Iran and Saudi Arabia already, earlier this year, held talks that reached a compromise to resolve some differences regarding Iranian pilgrims making the Hajj to Mecca.

Then along comes Donald Trump, preaching a message not of rapprochement and reconciliation, not of the need for countries that live in the same neighborhood and are not going anywhere to share that neighborhood, but instead a message of militancy, hostility, and isolation. He has been appealing to, and bolstering, all the worst, most parochial inclinations of the Saudis and others, and opposing inclinations based on their better judgment.

The Saudi-led move against Qatar was not initiated by Trump but was in effect encouraged by him (and not just because he has bragged of being responsible for it), with its mishmash of anti-Iran, anti-Muslim Brotherhood tones resembling the music that Trump had been singing. All the issues about the Brotherhood and other intra-GCC disputes had been around for a long time; it is no accident that the move against Doha was made when it was.

In the narrow perspective of Donald Trump, when his simply drawn lines of conflict – of good and evil, of winners and losers – cause him problems because reality is more complicated, his usual response is to draw the lines even more narrowly. Something of this has been happening with relations in the Persian Gulf.

As of the time of his trip, the projected image was of a grand coalition that

could join in eternal hostility toward the forces of evil, with Iran at the center of those forces. When the more complex reality soon reasserted itself in the Qatar imbroglio, Trump's immediate inclination was to narrow the lines of conflict some more while keeping them just as simple, and to side with the Saudis while dumping on the Qataris.

There is a parallel with how Trump responds to challenges domestically and within his own administration – always narrowing, and casting out those whom he may have lauded before but then no longer fit the simple vision. If Qatar, notwithstanding that U.S. military base, has to go the way of Chris Christie and Michael Flynn, then, in Trump's view, so be it.

Discourse in Washington, especially at its partisan and blame-shifting worst, has long found ways to attribute conflict and disorder in the Middle East to this or that U.S. president. Often, as is true as well of events in other regions, the attribution of events, for good or for ill, to the U.S. president gets overstated.

But it is not an overstatement that a posture of stoking tensions and division rather than of encouraging their de-escalation, of swearing eternal hostility to a major regional state, of screwing up opportunities for rapprochement within the region, and of forgoing the United States' own opportunities by bad-mouthing the nuclear agreement with Iran and refusing to build on it in addressing other issues, is making the security situation in the Persian Gulf worse. That's bad for the denizens of the Gulf and bad for the United States.

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Saudi Royals Bring Trump into Line

Exclusive: Donald Trump once condemned Saudi sponsorship of terrorism but – after his lavish reception in Riyadh and Saudi promises of rich arms deals – he has fallen under the kingdom's spell, as Daniel Lazare explains.

By Daniel Lazare

Donald Trump's statements in response to the Qatar, Saudi and Iranian diplomatic crisis have been bizarre even by Trumpian standards. The fun started with a

presidential tweet shortly after 9 a.m. on Tuesday in response to the decision by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to impose a state of siege on Qatar as payback for its funding of the Muslim Brotherhood and extremist groups.

“During my recent trip to the Middle East,” it said, “I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar – look!” – a favorable reference to the siege.

Then, less than two hours later, came another blast in the form of back-to-back tweets: “So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!”

Trump thus sided with two U.S. allies against a third that happens to host the massive Al-Udeid airbase, home of some 10,000 American military personnel.

Then, on Wednesday afternoon, the White House issued a graceless statement regarding the Islamic State suicide attack a few hours earlier on the Iranian parliament and the shrine of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini: “We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times. We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote.”

The evil they promote? This sounded awfully close to “they had it coming,” a stunningly brutal response to an incident in which 17 innocent people died. If Tehran had said anything comparable about 9/11, there is no doubt that the U.S. would have forgotten about Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and invaded Iran instead.

It was Trump at his most disconcerting. But what does it all mean? One thing is that while everyone in Washington seems to think that Trump has been captured by the Russians, the real story, it suggests, is that he’s been captured by the Saudis.

Wagging the Dog

There are any number of reasons why, but the bottom line is that if Adel al-Jubeir, the kingdom’s unctuous foreign minister, says that Iran is the number one supporter of terrorism or that Qatar is a prime sponsor, then the orange-haired POTUS will scowl on cue and nod approvingly.

Henceforth, the U.S. will take its marching orders from Riyadh just as it does from Tel Aviv elsewhere in the region. Never before has the tail more firmly wagged the dog.

But that's only part of the story. The other part is that Trump has fallen into the rabbit hole of U.S. anti-terrorism policy. He's trapped in an alternative universe filled with misinformation, false assumptions, and logical absurdities. The deeper he goes, the harder it is to find a way out.

This may sound strange since, at first glance, nothing seems simpler than anti-terrorism. After all, blowing up innocent people or slashing them to death on crowded city streets is something that all decent people abhor, so what could be more obvious than just saying no?

But when you probe a little more deeply, the structure proves surprisingly rickety. Yes, yes, bombing a rock concert is vicious beyond words. But what about firebombing an entire city, something the RAF did with regularity in World War II? Is that any better – and if so, why?

Osama bin Laden was, without doubt, a monster. But what about Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, the man in charge of the RAF raids, who once boasted, "I kill thousands of people every night"? [See Stephen A. Garrett, "Terror Bombings of German Cities in World War II," in Igor Primoratz, ed., *Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues* (Houndsmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 156.]

Is he a monster too? If your answer is no because he was fighting the Nazis, then you've fallen prey to "consequentialism," the notion that the morality of any such act is impossible to assess without attention to the final goal. If incinerating women and children is what it takes to defeat Hitler, then we must all put our shoulder to the wheel, or so the consequentialists tell us.

Yet countless politicians have warned against such relativist thinking since 9/11 on the grounds that terrorism can never be justified regardless of its motivation because the act is uniquely evil and only evil people do it. Of course, this absolutism ignores the moral ambiguities of warfare throughout history. But it also locks Americans into a logical conundrum from which there is no escape.

Terrorists are evil-doers, and evil-doers are terrorists. If America decides that someone is evil, then the T-word almost inevitably follows. Since terrorism is impossible to define in a way acceptable to all, the United States, the global sovereign, gets to define it in as self-serving a manner as it wishes.

Trump's Truth

Once upon a time, Trump seemed to realize, in a dim way, that something was amiss. In 2011, he described Saudi Arabia as "the world's biggest funder of terrorism" and said it was using "our petro dollars – our very own money – to fund the terrorists that seek to destroy our people while the Saudis rely on us

to protect them.”[Donald J. Trump, *Time to Get Tough: Making America #1 Again* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011), p. 20.]

The broad-brush word “terrorism” may have made no more sense in this instance than it did in any other. But at least Trump grasped that the Saudis were the arsonist rather than the firefighter and that it was nonsense to try to cover that reality up.

On the campaign trail, Trump once declared that the Saudis “blew up the World Trade Center,” and said that American firepower was the only thing saving them from disaster. “If it weren’t for us, they wouldn’t be here,” he told NBC’s “Meet the Press.” “They wouldn’t exist.”

All of which was true. But that was before the Saudis agreed to purchase \$110 billion in U.S. military hardware and projected a five-story image of his face on the side of the local Ritz-Carlton during his visit last month to Riyadh. So, in Trump’s mind, the Saudis were transformed. Instead of bad guys, they were now good.

And since they were good, they could no longer be terrorists or sponsors of terrorism. Indeed, they were now so good that they were in a position to say who the real sponsors of terrorism were. When they pointed at Qatar, Trump instantly agreed.

Of course, Qatar’s role as a funder of Al Qaeda and ISIS (also known as ISIL, Islamic State, and Daesh) is also well known, as is the UAE’s. In mid-2014, Hillary Clinton wrote in an email made public by Wikileaks that “Qatar and Saudi Arabia ... are providing clandestine financial and logistical support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region,” while Vice President Joe Biden told an audience at Harvard a couple of months later that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. ... were so determined to take down [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war ... [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” (Quote starts at 53:35.)

Yet, U.S. officials continued to provide cover for these funders, as Donald Trump eventually did as well.

“Our relationship is extremely good,” Trump told the press as he sat down with Qatari Emir Hamad al-Thani in Riyadh on May 21. “We have some very serious discussions right now going on, and one of the things that we will discuss is the purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment because nobody makes it

like the United States. And for us that means jobs, and it also means, frankly, great security back there [i.e. in Qatar], which we want.”

In other words, Qatar was a friend just a couple of weeks ago. But since the emirate (population 313,000 not counting foreign workers) is in no position to buy as many “beautiful” weapons as the Saudis (population 33 million), it can’t be as good a friend and thus wound up on the defensive when the Saudis accused it of aiding and abetting the enemy.

Blaming Iran

As for Iran, this is where U.S. officials make the “terrorism” word mean whatever they want. In February, Secretary of Defense James Mattis called Iran “the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world” while Trump followed up on May 21 with the charge that it “funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.”

This was standing truth on its head since the Saudis, the prime source of sectarianism in the Middle East, ban all religions other than Islam, routinely arrest Christians for the “crime” of praying and possessing Bibles, and have imposed a state of siege on Shi’ites in their own Eastern Province.

This is not to say that Iran is not also guilty of religious discrimination. But while its treatment of Bahais is despicable, at least it allows Christian churches and Sunni mosques to operate openly while, according to the U.S. State Department, there is “little interference with Jewish religious practices.” While Tehran has 13 active synagogues, Riyadh, needless to say, has none. Iran’s sins, in other words, are of a different order of magnitude than those of its rival across the Strait of Hormuz.

But if Saudi Arabia is now “good” and therefore “anti-terrorist,” then its enemy, Iran, must be a terrorist state par excellence and very, very evil. And, thus, Shi’ite-ruled Iran must be responsible for ISIS even though ISIS views Shi’ites with the same genocidal fury as state-salaried Wahhabist mullahs do in Riyadh.

By looking at terrorism through this peculiar prism, you can understand Trump’s statement that Iran had it coming. It’s at fault even if it’s the victim.

Needless to say, Iran sees things differently. Turning tables on the U.S., Mohammad Hossein Nejat, deputy head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards intelligence branch, charged that the incident was obviously the fault of America and the Saudis because it occurred just a couple of weeks after Trump’s

sit-down with the royal family in Riyadh.

“For these two actions to happen ... after this meeting means that the U.S. and Saudi regimes had ordered their stooges to do,” he said according to the Fars news agency.

Unfortunately, Nejat provided no evidence, so we have no idea whether what he’s saying is true or just speculation. But since ISIS is plainly a Saudi asset, it’s hardly implausible that a Saudi official might have telephoned a friend in Islamic State to let him know that such an operation would not be viewed with disfavor.

Or perhaps ISIS reached the same conclusion on its own after reading Trump’s Riyadh speech on the Internet. Regardless, it’s an example of how America’s “Alice in Wonderland” war on terrorism is fanning the flames of sectarianism. The slaughter in Tehran, like that in Manchester and London, is a sign of a things to come.

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

Trump’s Blunders Fuel Mideast Conflicts

President Trump’s simplistic siding with Saudi Arabia and Israel – and his callous reaction to a terror attack on Iran – are fueling new tensions in the Middle East, including the Qatar crisis, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

Have “MbS” and “MbZ” overreached themselves? It is still early in the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar, but yes, it seems so. And in so doing, the hubris of Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), the Saudi defense minister and the powerful son of Saudi King Salman, and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, will change the region’s geopolitical architecture.

President’s Trump’s (flawed) base strategic premises (and narratives) that Iran is the ultimate source of *all* instability in the region, and that the smacking down of Qatar, a major patron of Palestinian Hamas, *per se*, was a good thing, and should be applauded, bear direct responsibility for the direction in which

regional geopolitics will now flow.

President Trump returned from his first overseas trip convinced that he had unified the United States' historic Arab allies, and dealt a strong blow against terrorism. He did neither. He has been badly informed.

The fissure between Qatar and Saudi Arabia is an old, storied affair, which harks back to longstanding al-Saud angst at the original British decision to empower the al-Thani family in their Qatar foothold in an otherwise all-Saudi fiefdom. But if we lay aside, for a moment, the airing of the long list of Saudi and UAE contemporary complaints against Qatar, which for most part, simply serve as justification for recent action, we should return to the two principles that fundamentally shape the al-Saud mindset and strategy – and which lie at the heart of this current spat with Qatar.

The Reactionary Saudis

Firstly, the al-Saud are convinced that there can be absolutely no legitimate or admissible challenge to the Islamic purity of their credentials as successors-in-authority to the *Quresh* (the tribe of The Prophet), or as the guardians of Islam's two holy shrines. And secondly, as followers of Mohammad al-Wahhab, they are convinced that they alone – the representatives of the Wahhabi orientation – constitute the true and only Islam. The Shi'a, by contrast, are viewed as apostates, innovators, revisionists and "rejectionists" (i.e. deniers of this history of legitimate transmission of Islamic authority to the al-Saud).

What has this to do with Qatar (which is Wahhabi too)? Well, a number of things: firstly, the Qatari leadership in the Saudi view, is upstart (i.e. purely a product of British colonial politics), and does not – through its independent actions – show any due respect for the legitimacy and rightness of Saudi authority and leadership. Rather, Qatar sets itself up as a peer rival – as a usurper.

Secondly, Hamas: The point here is *not* that Hamas is a Palestinian resistance movement, or "terrorist." It is that it is a part of the Muslim Brotherhood, and that during its Nasserist exile in the Gulf, it gave intellectual polish to the Wahhabist doctrine (i.e. Salafism) at the Saudi behest, but then added a mean "twist" to its tail: Instead of awarding worldly sovereignty to the Saudi monarchs – horror of horror – the Muslim Brothers (MB) ascribed sovereignty to the Umma (the community of Believers).

Qatar, in patronizing Hamas therefore, is seen as empowering the strain of Sunni Islamism, which directly challenges Saudi kingship and legitimacy. They (the al-Saud) want the MB crushed – *not because they are "terrorist"* (as Trump evidently

assumes), but because they disdain hereditary, monarchical rulership.

But additionally, Qatar harbored, and still harbors (and pays for), an irreverent, “disrespectful” press that both questions the *status quo* and gives play to Muslim Brotherhood “democratic” sentiments. The UAE and Saudi Arabia want Qatar’s irritating media closed. All of it: *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabi al Jadid*, *Al Quds al Arabi*, and the Arabic edition of *Huffington Post*, along with the expulsion of Azmi Bishara, a Qatar-based Palestinian public intellectual and author who is now general director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Diplomacy with Iran

And as the final “sin,” Qatar (in company with GCC members Oman and Kuwait), seeks a *modus vivendi* with Iran (i.e. with the “rejectionists,” themselves), and therefore is putting the very principles of the “Sunni Alliance” at risk.

As Dr. Emile Nakhleh, a former Senior Intelligence Service officer, and Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program at the CIA, notes: “Tensions within the GCC go back to its creation in May 1981. However reluctantly, Gulf Arab emirates acceded to Riyadh’s invitation to enlist because they supported the organization’s three main objectives: to help preserve tribal family rule; stifle all anti-regime democratic protests and preserve autocracy; and enlist Western military support to defend the Gulf Arab littoral from the perceived threat of Iran following its 1979 revolution.”

In brief, this dispute has nothing to do with simplistic Western notions of fighting “terrorism” – it has everything to do with *power* – restoring and bolstering Saudi power. Saudi Arabia’s leaders are feeling weak and vulnerable. It is time, they feel, to draw “a line in the sand”: The unexpected, but plainly pre-prepared, strike at Qatar represented the drawing of a “line.”

Saudi Defense Minister MbS’s friends, long before this, had begun to frame the conflict with Iran as a religious war against the Shi’a by using the language of jihad both in order to mobilize the base, and to promote a Sunni military alliance (led by Saudi Arabia), that would restore Saudi influence across the Middle East. Call to religious jihad is a well-tried tool for forcing cohesion.

But as Gregory Copley noted in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* recently, [by the time MbS met President Trump in the Oval Office on March 14] “Prince Mohammad had already committed Saudi Arabia to a path from which it was difficult to retire gracefully. As a result, Riyadh was pushing its erstwhile friends deeper into a commitment to fight its wars, with it – or for it. Prince Mohammad continues to demand that Pakistan enter the conflict in Yemen, despite

the fact that this was being promoted by Riyadh as a war against the Shi'a sect of Islam (and therefore against Iran), whilst Pakistan has a significant (20 percent plus) Shi'a minority."

Sweeping Up Trump

Copley summed up the March 14 meeting thus: "Prince Mohammad seemed to want to sweep President Trump into the Saudi camp – and to speak for all Muslims [on Trump's behalf] on how the Trump Administration would be good for them."

But here was the rub, not only Pakistan, but GCC members Qatar, Oman and Kuwait disagreed. They did not want this sectarian war: they wanted accommodation with the Shi'a (Kuwait has a sizeable population of Shi'a). The Qatari leader too, had recently reconciled the Sunni and Shi'a branches of the influential Tamim tribe (which extends into the Saudi Nejd) under his leadership. This represented a direct slap in the face to bin Salman's deliberately polarizing, "jihad" rhetoric – and to his hope of enlisting Trump to the (weakening Saudi camp).

Why did Trump go along? His two key "tweets" during this week, give compelling evidence of his "capture" by a one-sided "narrative." Firstly, we had Trump's tweet claiming credit for the UAE and Saudi ultimatum and blockade of Qatar. It gives the impression that the President thought that this MbS and MbZ ploy was somehow striking a blow at the financing of terrorism, and cornering Iran.

Then as Ishaan Tharoor wrote in the *Washington Post* in the wake of the assault on Tehran (ISIS attack on Parliament and a shrine), condemnations and condolences rained in (to Tehran) from around the world:

"And then there was President Trump. The White House has made a particular habit of commenting swiftly on Islamic State-related attacks elsewhere, be they in Paris, London, Manchester or even a phantom episode in the Philippines. But for many hours Wednesday, Trump was conspicuously quiet. The State Department's spokeswoman issued a pro forma condemnation, asserting that 'the depravity of terrorism has no place in a peaceful, civilized world.'

"When Trump ultimately broke his silence, though, *his message snuffed out whatever goodwill American diplomats may have wanted to convey [emphasis added].*

"'We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times,' began the statement, before concluding with a startling swipe at Tehran. 'We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote.'"

A Grave Insult

These tweets imply clearly President Trump's wholesale embrace of the agenda and rhetoric of Iran's major rivals in the region: Saudi Arabia and Israel. This was a landmark tweet, which neither will be forgotten, nor forgiven in the region. It was not some political slip-up. It was more serious than mere politics, or whether Trump likes or dislikes Iran. It transgresses in terms of human feelings; it disrespects human "being."

The Manchester bombing, the London Bridge cutting of throats, were abhorrent, but still – mercifully – exceptional occurrences. Shi'a men, women and children suffer a "Manchester" every day in Iraq, in Syria and Yemen. A total of 163 civilians, including women and children, escaping Mosul, were slaughtered by ISIS just days ago. Hundreds of thousands of Shi'a Arabs, Turkmen and others today sit in refugee camps mourning their beheaded husbands, sons and brothers. And the bodies of those fighting ISIS in Iraq arrive in the Mosques to a daily rhythm.

Trump effectively said these people "had it coming to them" for supporting "terrorism." Until this point, Iran and the Shi'a world were truly willing to give Trump the benefit of their doubts. That has changed now, I believe. Trump has made himself – unnecessarily – into a callous, ideological enemy of the Shi'a.

There is no one "truth" in the Middle East: Prince Bandar, when still head of Saudi Intelligence, once told the head of MI6 that: "The time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally 'God help the Shia.' More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them."

The MI6 Chief understood from these words that the subsequent *anti-Shi'a jihad* in Iraq and Syria and the rise of ISIS was not, somehow unconnected with Bandar's somber warnings.

Trump's Bad Advice

"Terrorism" is never as straight-forward as it may seem, when observed from a safe distance. The two tweets, in short, make the U.S. President appear naïve and bigoted (which generally, he is not). Trump is quite capable of thinking out of the box – but he needs less self-serving, one-sided, factional advice. A better policy would be for him simply to maintain ties with *all* the main regional players.

What will be the outcome of this crisis, which is, in fact, a *reactionary* strike against the forces for change? Reports suggest that the Saudi leadership expected Qatar's complete capitulation to the blockade within 24 hours. They may have misjudged egregiously. Qatar, may be tiny, but its financial tentacles have

real reach, and muscle (in an economically needy time).

It has big friends too (Turkey and, more cautiously, Iran and perhaps Russia and Iraq standing in the background, too). Qatar may try to compromise, and to play it long, but initial reports suggest that MbS and MbZ are immovable (they treated the Kuwaiti Emir with disdain and discourtesy). We shall see.

In any event, it is questionable whether the GCC as such, will survive such a bludgeoning by Saudi Arabia. We may see a fracture of the Gulf world, with Turkey or Egypt trying to gather up enough pieces to displace Saudi leadership. In any event, the geo-political landscape will shift: either the political center of gravity will displace to the north, with Turkey gaining a strategic foothold in the Arab world, or MbS will attempt to double down.

However, any desperate attempt such as a military occupation of Qatar (on Bahrain lines) by Saudi Arabia, could lead to serious escalation – or even to a military clash. And one may question also, whether the al-Saud family will view a *putsch* – which is what may be intended – against a fellow Gulf leader, as just a bridge too far.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

Trump Lets Saudis Off His ‘Muslim Ban’

Exclusive: By leaving Saudi Arabia and other key terrorism sponsors off his “Muslim ban,” President Trump shows the same cowardice and dishonesty that infected the Bush and Obama administrations, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Trump’s ban against letting people from seven mostly Muslim countries enter the United States looks to many like a thinly concealed bias against a religion, but it also is a troubling sign that Trump doesn’t have the nerve to challenge the false terrorism narrative demanded by Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli-Saudi narrative, which is repeated endlessly inside Official Washington, is that Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism when that dubious honor clearly falls to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-led Muslim states, including Pakistan, nations that did not make Trump’s list.

The evidence of who is funding and supporting most of the world's terrorism is overwhelming. All major terrorist groups that have bedeviled the United States and the West over the past couple of decades – from Al Qaeda to the Taliban to Islamic State – can trace their roots back to Sunni-led countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Qatar.

Privately, this reality has been recognized by senior U.S. officials, including former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Trump's National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. But that knowledge has failed to change U.S. policy, which caters to the oil-rich Saudis and the politically powerful Israelis.

For instance, in August 2012, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency – then headed by General Flynn – warned that Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda were “the major forces driving the insurgency” against the largely secular government in Syria.

Flynn's DIA advised President Obama that rebels were trying to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that “western countries, the gulf states, and Turkey are supporting these efforts” to counter the supposed Shiite threat to the region.

Hillary Clinton also was aware of this reality, as the threat from the head-chopping Islamic State – also known as ISIL or ISIS – grew worse in summer 2014. In September 2014, the former Secretary of State wrote in an email that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups.”

Later in 2014, Vice President Joe Biden made the same point in a talk at Harvard's Kennedy School: “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” [Quote starts at 53:25.]

Known But Unknown

So the truth was known at senior levels of the Obama administration – and now via National Security Advisor Flynn at the top of the Trump administration – but the Israelis and the Saudis don't want that reality to shape U.S. foreign policy. In other words, this truth about the real source of terrorism was known

but unknown.

Instead, Israel demands that Washington share its hatred of the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, a Shiite force that organized in the 1980s to drive the invading Israeli army out of southern Lebanon. Because Hezbollah dealt a rare defeat to the Israeli Defense Force, Israel puts it at the top of “terrorist” organizations. And, Hezbollah is supported by Iran.

Saudi Arabia, too, hates Iran because the Sunni-fundamentalist Saudi monarchy considers Shia Islam heretical, a sectarian conflict that dates back to the Seventh Century. So, the Saudi government has viewed Sunni jihadists as the tip of the spear against these Shiite rivals.

Israeli and Saudi officials have even made clear that they would prefer Al Qaeda or Islamic State to prevail in the Syrian war rather than have the largely secular government of President Bashar al-Assad survive because they see his regime as part of a “Shiite crescent” reaching from Tehran through Damascus to the Hezbollah neighborhoods of Beirut.

In September 2013, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, 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 said in [the 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.

And, in June 2014, speaking as a former ambassador at an Aspen Institute conference, Oren expanded on his position, [saying](#) Israel would even prefer a victory by the brutal Islamic State over 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.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Israel, Saudi Arabia and Terrorism.”](#)]

The West’s Worries

However, when Americans and Europeans worry about terrorism, they are talking about Al Qaeda and Islamic State, terror groups led by Sunni extremists. Those are the groups that have been responsible for bloody attacks on the United States and Western Europe.

The absurdity of Trump's immigration ban is underscored by the fact that it would not have kept out the 15 Saudi hijackers dispatched by Al Qaeda to carry out the 9/11 attacks. They came from the home country of Al Qaeda's Saudi founder Osama bin Laden.

Neither would Trump's ban have stopped Muhamed Atta, one of the 9/11 ringleaders who was from Egypt, another country ignored by Trump, which also happens to be the original home of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's current leader.

So, what Trump's initial foray into the complex issue of terrorism has revealed is that he is unwilling to take on the real nexus of terrorism, just as Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama shied away from a clash with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms.

In the first week of Donald Trump's presidency, the regional interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia have continued to dictate how Official Washington addresses terrorism.

Trump's seven-nation list includes Iran, Syria and Sudan as state sponsors of terrorism and Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Libya as countries where there has been terrorist activity. But the governments of Iran and Syria arguably have become two of the leading fighters against the terrorist groups of most concern to the U.S. and European populations.

Iran is aiding both Syria and Iraq in their conflicts with Al Qaeda and Islamic State. Inside Syria, the Syrian army has borne the brunt of that fighting against terror groups funded and armed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and – yes – at least indirectly, the United States. Yet while none of the Al Qaeda/Islamic State benefactors made Trump's list, Iran and Syria did.

In other words, not only is Trump's ban a blunderbuss blast at thousands of innocent Muslims who have no intention of hurting the United States but it doesn't even take aim at the most dangerous targets which represent a genuine terrorist threat.

Trump's ban is really a twisted case of "political correctness" purporting to reject "political correctness." While Trump claims to recognize that it is dangerously naïve to let in Muslims when Islamic terrorism has remained a threat to Americans, Trump has left off his list the most likely sources of terrorists because – to do otherwise – would have negative political consequences in Official Washington.

By going after Iran and Syria, in particular, Trump appears to be currying favor with neoconservatives and liberal hawks in Congress and across Official Washington. Perhaps, he is simply hesitating while the Senate considers

confirmation of his choice for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. The Senate also could reject other of his foreign policy nominees.

But that is exactly the kind of compromising that undermined any attempts by President Obama to engineer a real change from the “war of terror” strategy of George W. Bush. Obama was so afraid of going against the Israelis and the Saudis that he only altered U.S. policy on the margins and let himself get dragged into Israeli-Saudi-favored “regime change” adventures in Syria and Yemen.

Dashed or Delayed Hopes

When Trump initially rebuffed the neocons and liberal hawks who dominate Official Washington’s foreign establishment, there was hope that he might at least try to hold Saudi Arabia accountable as the chief sponsor of terrorism, rather than to continue the Israeli-Saudi-imposed narrative.

But to do so carried political risks beyond offending the politically potent Israelis who have forged a quiet alliance with the wealthy Saudis. Trump would also have to recognize the important role of Republican icon Ronald Reagan in creating the terrorist threat.

After all, the origins of the modern jihadist movement trace back to the \$1 billion-a-year collaboration between the Reagan administration and the Saudi monarchy to support the Afghan mujahedeen in their war against a secular government in Kabul backed by the Soviet Union.

The extravagant arming of these Afghan fundamentalists, who were bolstered by international jihadists led by Osama bin Laden, dealt a harsh blow to the Soviet forces and ultimately led to the collapse of the secular regime in Kabul, but the victory also paved the way for the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, blowback that hit the United States on 9/11.

The U.S. reaction to that shock never directly addressed how the problem had originated and who the underlying culprits were. Though George W. Bush’s administration did begin by invading Afghanistan, the neoconservatives around him quickly turned the U.S. retaliation against longstanding Israeli targets, such as Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Syria’s Assad dynasty though they had nothing to do with 9/11.

The fiction that these largely secular governments were responsible for Islamic terrorism – and the mislabeling of Shia-ruled Iran as the chief sponsor of such terrorism – have remained the myths confusing the American people and thus justifying continued U.S. support for the Israeli-Saudi war against the “Shiite crescent.”

Trump, who is heavily criticized for his inability to distinguish fact from fantasy, could have displayed a brave commitment to truth-telling if he had fashioned his counter-terrorism policy to actually address the real sponsors of terrorism. Instead, he chose to continue the lies that the Israelis and Saudis insist that Official Washington tell.

In doing so, Trump is not only offending much of the world and alienating countries that are at the forefront of the fight against the worst terrorist threats, but he is continuing to shield the key regimes that have perpetuated the scourge of terrorism.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

How Obama Spread the Mideast Fires

Exclusive: Barack Obama is one of the “coolest” American presidents, but his “team of rivals” approach to governing – trying to accommodate and co-opt his adversaries – proved disastrous, especially in the Mideast, says Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

With President Obama down to less than two weeks in office, everyone is busy assessing his legacy. So let's begin with the Arab world. Not since the Vietnam War, we can safely say, has an administration left a region in ruins the way Obama has left the Middle East (although it's true that George W. Bush contributed mightily to the mess).

But Obama has expanded the chaos outward from Bush's legacy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, now including Libya, Syria and Yemen with ripple effects from the refugee flows extending into Turkey and even into Europe. Terrorism is exploding, entire nations have been reduced to war zones, while religious sectarianism is raging out of control.

Of course, not all of it is Obama's fault. After all, he didn't start the Sunni-Shia conflict, which dates back to the mid-Seventh Century, nor is he responsible for Arab-Persian ethnic tensions in general, which go back even farther. But he breathed new life into such forces and enabled them to achieve a new kind of prominence, with consequences that are little short of breathtaking.

How did someone so charming and seemingly so progressive wreak such havoc? The answer is through a combination of weakness, complacency, and taking the easy way out. Obama is the sort of cool and laid-back individual who adapts effortlessly to whatever institution he finds himself in, whether it's the Harvard Law Review, the Illinois state legislature, the U.S. Senate or the White House.

The writer Edward L. Fox argues that, during his childhood in Indonesia, he soaked up the Javanese doctrine of *halus* in which a king "does not conquer opposing political forces, but absorbs them all under himself." Instead of meeting conflict head on, the king floats serenely above it. The idea is to "let your opponent yell and scream, listen politely, and then, when your adversary has exhausted himself, somehow end up winning."

Whereas someone a little less afraid of getting his hair mussed might have confronted "the Blob," as Washington's pro-war foreign-policy establishment is known, Obama decided to name Hillary Clinton, one of its chief standard-bearers, as Secretary of State, and keep Robert Gates, another pillar of the national security establishment, as Secretary of Defense.

Rather than fighting what President Dwight Eisenhower dubbed the "military-industrial complex," Obama's idea was to disarm it by bringing some of its chief advocates into his inner circle and perhaps give his own standing a boost as well. But what it chiefly did was to provide the War Party with a new lease on life.

More Conflict, Not Less

The upshot was more conflict rather than less. John Kerry, Clinton's no-less-bellicose successor, made this clear in his much-ballyhooed Dec. 28 speech about the breakdown in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Although the address has been hailed in certain quarters as an attempt to put peace back on track, a careful reading reveals something very different: the epic two-state talks between Israel and Palestine were not about peace, but about tamping down conflict in one corner of the Middle East so that the U.S. could pursue various imperial misadventures in others. Kerry revealed as much by declaring that all of America's allies have "common interests in countering Iran's destabilizing activities."

The 2002 Saudi Initiative, which served as the basis for the latest failed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, not only called for an Israeli-Palestinian accord, but for a regional defense agreement aimed at keeping the Persians out.

The framework, Kerry went on, "envisages Israel being a partner in those efforts

when peace [with the Palestinians] is made. This is the area where Israel and the Arab world are looking at perhaps the greatest moment of potential transformation in the Middle East since Israel's creation in 1948. The Arab world faces its own set of security challenges. With Israeli-Palestinian peace, Israel, the United States, Jordan, Egypt – together with the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries – would be ready and willing to define a new security partnership for the region that would be absolutely groundbreaking.”

This was the old goal of a “GCC + 2” security umbrella in which Israel and the Palestinians would forget their differences and join with Egypt, Jordan, and the six members of the GCC – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – to form a united front against a non-Arab intruder, Iran.

The alliance thus had an ethnic dimension right from the start. But it also had a religious dimension since all eight Arab nations are Sunni or Sunni-controlled with the minor exception of Oman. So, GCC + 2 would only pave the way for a growing sectarian conflict between Wahhabism, the stringent form of Sunni orthodoxy that is the official state ideology in Saudi Arabia, the dominant member of the GCC, and Iranian Shi'ism.

But since Shi'ism is not confined to a single nation but is actually the majority religion throughout the Persian Gulf area, it was a formula for something even worse, an all-out regional struggle between the Sunni states led by Riyadh on one hand and, on the other, an Iranian-dominated “Shi'ite crescent” stretching from Lebanon and Syria to Bahrain, Yemen, and the Saudis' own Eastern Province, the center of both its oil industry and its 15 percent Shi'ite minority.

The Worst Passions

It was a strategy guaranteed to excite the worst passions on both sides of the divide. It was a recipe not only for war but for religious war, which is the worst kind. Not surprisingly, violence exploded, and more than a million refugees were sent fleeing toward Europe, a human inundation that is now roiling the political waters from Paris to Warsaw.

Yet, Obama – with his Javanese penchant for reconciling opposites – has shown a strange combination of vision and blindness throughout the debacle. He spoke up in favor of human rights. But at his first meeting with Saudi King Abdullah, he bowed deeply and apparently kissed his hand, a curious gesture for a young progressive encountering one of the world's greatest despots but it was a sign of hypocrisies to come. Obama protested loudly when Bashar al-Assad's cracked down on Sunni-led Arab Spring protests in Syria, but Obama remained silent when Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to crack down on Shi'ite-led Arab Spring protests

in neighboring Bahrain.

Welcoming Abdullah's equally tyrannical neighbor, Qatar's Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, in April 2011, Obama uttered the usual diplomatic boilerplate, expressing appreciation for "the leadership that the emir has shown when it comes to democracy in the Middle East." But he was franker in private.

Not realizing that he was speaking into an open mike, he told donors at a Democratic fundraiser in Chicago later that evening that Al-Thani was a "pretty influential guy. He is a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East. Reform, reform, reform – you're seeing it on Al Jazeera. Now, he himself is not reforming significantly. There's no big move towards democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income of Qatar is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict."

In fact, Al-Thani is a lawless autocrat who, according to Obama's own State Department, prohibits organized political parties, restricts civil liberties "including freedoms of speech, press, and assembly and access to a fair trial," and countenances human trafficking "primarily in the domestic worker and labor sectors." But since he has oodles of oil and natural gas and is friendly to the U.S. besides, he gets a free pass.

Double your standards, double your fun. A month later, Obama gave a major address in which he called for "freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders – whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa, or Tehran." But he remained studiously silent about Saudi Arabia, America's chief ally in the region, where the rule of law is nonexistent and the status of women is probably the worst in the world.

While urging freedom for Egypt's Christian minority, he said nothing about how the Saudis routinely arrest Christians for the "crime" of attending underground services, close down Shia mosques, or tolerate dangerous sectarian rhetoric in which Sunni routinely accuse "evil Shias" of "set[ting] traps for monotheism and for the Sunnis" and seeking to "skin Sunnis and boil them in water."

Enlisting the Autocracies

But not only did Obama shield the other oil autocracies from criticism, but, on the theory that only Arabs can solve Arab problems, he encouraged them to become more active abroad. The results were uniformly disastrous. Despite Al-Thani's well-established record as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar forces, Hillary Clinton spent much of late March 2011 persuading him to take part in the U.S.-led military effort to overthrow Libyan strongman Muammar

Gaddafi, according to an internal State Department memo. When he said yes, the Obama administration was overjoyed.

But Al-Thani took advantage of the deal to distribute some \$400 million to Salafist rebels in the form of machine guns, automatic rifles, and ammunition so that they could do to Libya what an earlier generation of U.S.-backed jihadis had done to Afghanistan, i.e. reduce it to chaos.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-run states responded the same way when the U.S. invited them to fund the uprising against Syria's leader Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, a branch of Shi'a Islam. These "friends of Syria" channeled billions of dollars in aid to Salafist rebels determined to impose Saudi-style fundamentalism.

In August 2012, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda were "the major forces driving the insurgency," that rebels were seeking to establish a "Salafist principality in eastern Syria," and that "western countries, the gulf states, and Turkey are supporting these efforts" in order to counter the Shi'ite threat.

In September 2014, Clinton wrote in an email that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were "providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups" while Vice President Joe Biden admitted the same thing a month later at a talk at Harvard's Kennedy School:

"Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world." [Quote starts at 53:25.]

A Spreading Fire

Yet President Obama did nothing to stop this pouring of gasoline on this regional sectarian war. Rather than tamping down the sectarianism, the U.S. facilitated its spread. Chatting with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Obama remarked how the easy-going Indonesia he remembered as a child was coming under the sway of the harsh and unforgiving Wahhabism taught in Saudi-funded madrassas.

"Aren't the Saudis your friends?" Turnbull asked. To which Obama could only smile and say: "It's complicated." This is Obama-speak for: "I reconcile opposites, but please don't ask me to explain how."

Once sectarianism is out of the bag, it's very hard to put it back in. In Turkey, which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan turned into a transit hub for Syria-bound Salafist fighters at U.S. behest, the country's 20 percent Alevi minority, which practices a form of Shi'ism, is hunkering down in anticipation of attacks by Erdogan's Sunni supporters, ISIS, or both. \ Since March 2015, Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen have been fending off an air assault by Saudis convinced that the Houthi fighters are part of some occult Iranian conspiracy aimed at taking over that country as well.

Members of the Saudi ruling elite "see the hand of Iran everywhere and take seriously the declarations in the Iranian press bragging about how Iran now controls four Arab capitals – Baghdad, Sanaa, Beirut, and Damascus," a Riyadh-based diplomat told the French journalist Alain Gresh. "They are obsessed with Iran," said another.

The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the Saudis, backed by the U.S., attack Shi'ite forces before they can attack them, thereby generating yet another round of conflict and recrimination.

Obama adapted to such paranoia all too gracefully and easily. Instead of fighting it, he accepted it as a given and tried to work with it, which only made it worse. The consequence was to tip the entire region into the abyss. Rarely has coolness led to more uncool results.

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

Obama's Dive into the Syrian Abyss

The bloody Syrian war got bloodier when President Obama allowed U.S. Mideast allies and hawkish U.S. officials to supply weapons to Sunni jihadists including those fighting alongside Al Qaeda's affiliate, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

President Barack Obama has long been under fire from the U.S. national security elite and the media for failing to intervene aggressively against the Assad regime. But the real strategic blunder was not that Barack Obama didn't launch yet another war in Syria, but that he decided to go along with the ambitions of America's Sunni allies to create and arm a Syrian opposition army to overthrow the regime in the first place.

Now a former Obama administration official who is knowledgeable on the internal discussions on Syria policy, speaking to this writer on condition of anonymity, has shed new light on how and why that fateful decision was made.

The former official revealed that when Obama made the first move toward supporting the arming of Syrian opposition forces, the President failed to foresee the risk of a direct Iranian or Russian intervention on behalf of the Syrian regime in response to an externally armed opposition – because his advisers had failed to take this likelihood into account themselves.

The story of this policy failure begins after military resistance to the Assad regime began in spring and summer 2011. In August 2011, national security officials began urging Obama to call on Assad to step down, according to the former official.

Obama did make a statement suggesting that Assad should step aside, but he made it clear privately that he had no intention of doing anything about it. “He viewed it as simply a suggestion, not a hard policy,” the ex-official said.

But soon after that, a bigger issue arose for the administration’s policy: how to respond to pressure from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for a U.S. commitment to help overthrow Assad. In September 2011, the Saudis and Turks not only wanted the U.S. to provide arms to the opposition. “They wanted the US to provide anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank missiles,” recalled the ex-official.

Turkey even offered to send troops into Syria to overthrow Assad, but only if the U.S. and NATO agreed to create a “no-fly zone” to protect them. But Obama refused to provide U.S. arms to the Syrian rebels and also opposed the Sunni foes of Assad providing such heavy weapons.

“He wasn’t willing to go along with anything except small arms,” said the former official.

Apparently to assuage the dissatisfaction of the Sunni allies, then-CIA Director David Petraeus devised a plan, which Obama approved, to help move the small arms from Libyan government stocks in Benghazi to Turkey.

Confirming the 2014 story by Seymour Hersh, the ex-official, recalled, “It was highly secret but officials involved in the Middle East learned of the program by word of mouth.” The combination of those two policy decisions committed Obama – albeit half-heartedly – to the armed overthrow of the Assad regime.

The former administration official confirmed the recollections of both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Pentagon official Derek Chollet that Obama’s advisers believed Assad’s fall was inevitable. Some of those

advisers believed Assad lacked the “cunning and fortitude” to remain in power, as Chollet put it.

Underestimating Iran and Russia

More importantly, when Obama was making crucial Syria policy decisions in September 2011, no one on his national security team warned him that Iran had a very major national security interest in keeping the Assad regime in power that could draw the Iranians into the war, according to the former official.

Obama’s advisers assumed instead that neither Iran nor Russia would do more than offer token assistance to keep Assad in power, so there was no risk of an endless, bloody sectarian war.

“Both Hezbollah and Iran had made noises that they were displeased with Assad’s handling of the crisis, and [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah even said publicly he should take a softer approach,” the ex-official recalled, “so it was believed Iran would not intervene militarily to save him.”

In fact, however, Iran regarded Syria as crucial to its ability to resupply Hezbollah, whose large arsenal of missiles was in turn a necessary element in Iran’s deterrent to an Israeli attack.

“Syria had been Iran’s and Hezbollah’s security in depth,” the ex-official said, but Obama’s advisers “didn’t have a clue” about Iran’s overriding national security interest in preventing Assad’s overthrow by the overwhelmingly Sunni opposition backed by a Sunni international coalition with U.S. support.

That major error of omission became obvious as the war unfolded. After the city of Qusayr near the Lebanese border was taken over by the Free Syrian Army in July 2012, opposition forces in southern Syria were able to get military supplies from across the border in Lebanon. It became clear in the months that followed that al-Nusra Front forces (Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate) were heavily involved in that front of the war.

Hezbollah Strikes Back

In May 2013, Hezbollah troops from the Bekaa Valley intervened in support of a regime counteroffensive to retake the city – obviously at Iranian urging. That Iranian-Hezbollah intervention resulted in the biggest defeat of rebel forces of the war up to that time.

But instead of questioning the soundness of the original decision to cooperate with the Sunni coalition’s “regime change” strategy, Obama’s national security team doubled down on its bet. Secretary of State John Kerry put strong pressure

on Obama to use military force against the Assad regime.

That resulted in a public commitment by the Obama administration in June 2013 to provide military support to the opposition for the first time. The deepening commitment nearly led to a new U.S. war against the Assad regime in September, after the chemical attack on the Damascus suburbs in August 2013.

The Obama administration even agreed to the Sunni states' provision of anti-tank weapons to an armed opposition now openly dominated by al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

That culminated in a Nusra Front-led command's conquest of Idlib province and the subsequent Russian intervention, which the administration's national security team obviously had not anticipated either. Obama and his advisers blundered on Syria in thinking that they were not getting into a high-risk war situation.

But there is a deeper level of explanation for the willingness of Obama and his advisers to go along with the inherent risk of another "regime change" policy – even if Obama was half-hearted about it at best and limited direct U.S. involvement in it.

The administration was unwilling to be at cross-purposes with its Sunni allies, the former official recalled, because of the direct U.S. military interests at stake in its alliances with those three states: the Saudis effectively controlled U.S. access to the naval base in Bahrain, Turkey controlled the airbase at Incirlik, and Qatar controlled land and air bases that had become central to U.S. military operations in the region.

What was a disastrous blunder in terms of the consequences for the Syrian people, therefore, was the only choice acceptable to the powerful national security institutions that constitute what has become the U.S. permanent war state. Their first concern was to ensure that existing military and intelligence arrangements and relationships were not jeopardized.

And Obama was not prepared to override that concern, despite his well-known skepticism about any arming of anti-Assad rebels in light of the blowback from America's support for the Afghan Mujahedeen in the 1980s.

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