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Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda

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

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

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

King Salman greets the President and First Lady during a state visit to Saudi Arabia on Jan. 27, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bush and Cheney "refus[ed] to declassify anything having to do with Saudi Arabia," former

Navy Secretary John F. Lehman, a member of the special commission, later complained. “Anything having to do with the Saudis, for some reason it had this very special sensitivity.” [Ibid., 185-86.]

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

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

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

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

The effect has been to reset the rules, although not quite in ways that people expected. Where the impending deal with Iran soon led to speculation that “the most fundamental realignment of U.S. foreign policy in a generation” was underway,<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[14]<!–[endif]–> the reality has been the opposite as Republicans and Democrats rushed to reassure their strategic partners that the old alliance would continue undisturbed.

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

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

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

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

country in the Middle East, to nightly bombing raids, then the U.S. would not object either.

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

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

As such policies drive Syria and Yemen to collapse and generate a tidal wave of refugees, the only consolation is that the Saudis may be cracking under the strain as well. With its mountainous terrain and deep tribal divisions, Yemen has long been a study in controlled chaos. But Riyadh has seemingly done everything in its power to make a bad situation worse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With Shi'ites comprising as much as 20 percent of the Pakistani population, the requirement

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

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

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

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

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

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