

Obama in the Middle East: From Bad to Worse

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President Obama's post-election promise of a "new dawn of American leadership" began in earnest five months into his first term with an important speech in Cairo June 4, 2009, appropriately titled, "A New Beginning." He started his oration by remarking "We meet at a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world.... I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."

The packed audience at Cairo University, including many students, was mesmerized by Obama's rhetoric and the renewal of hope for a better future. They were not told that his "new beginning" was based on the geopolitical intention to continue and tighten U.S. hegemony the Middle East. At the time Washington was supporting authoritarian regimes throughout the region, just as it does today. Further, Obama today is fighting or supporting more wars in the vicinity than when he assumed office.

The wreckage of that "new beginning" is strewn throughout the Middle East in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere.

President Obama inherited and approved of former President George W. Bush's stalemated Afghan war, now in its 14th year. He expanded the war in quest of victory but failed. He declared it was over, but 10,000 troops remain. It is probable this losing Bush-Obama venture will continue for many more years. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai is now telling all who will listen, including the leaders of India, Russia and China, that the U.S. and its NATO allies plan to remain in Afghan military bases and listening posts for many years because of its geopolitical proximity to China, Central Asia, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India.

Obama disapproved of Bush's unjust, unnecessary 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, which largely secured his nomination and election in November 2008. The U.S. pulled out of Iraq at the end of 2011 with nothing to show for this nine-year misadventure but a million dead Iraqis and trillions in taxpayer war debts. Two years later the remnant of al-Qaeda in Iraq began transforming into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), now the Islamic State (IS), without seeming to alarm the Oval Office. Suddenly, in June last year, IS defeated and occupied Mosul — Iraq's second largest city — in a matter of hours. By August the U.S. was once again at war in Iraq, but this time it was confined to an air campaign and retraining dispirited and poorly led Iraqi troops.

The U.S. campaign to defeat the religio-fascist Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria is a failure so far. Despite 10 months of American bombing IS remains strong. It has experienced a couple of big defeats, but has had several more major victories. Aside from the U.S. and a few allies, Washington's vaunted 60-country coalition exists in name only.

The U.S. war against IS — the end product so far of earlier American interventions beginning in the late 1970s — may last many years. Currently there are 3,050 U.S. troops in Iraq. Most are “supporting Iraqi security forces.” About 450 are “training Iraqi troops,” and 200 are in “advising and assisting roles.” On June 10 the White House announced it was sending another 450 troops to train members of Sunni Tribes. The Pentagon thinks these numbers are far too low. It seems inevitable that U.S. ground troops eventually will be deployed in large number, perhaps sooner than later.

McClatchy News reported June 12 that after 10 months of war “the White House has failed to give

Congress and the public a comprehensive written analysis setting out the legal powers that President Obama is using to put U.S. personnel in harm’s way in Iraq and Syria.... The only document the White House has provided to a few key lawmakers comprises four pages of what are essentially talking points, described by those who’ve read them as shallow and based on disputed assertions of presidential authority.”

Antiwar critic Phyllis Bennis wrote June 12:

“Almost nine months after President Obama admitted that ‘we don’t have a strategy yet’ to challenge the Islamic State - and just days after he said he still has ‘no complete Iraq strategy’ - the non-strategy suddenly has a name: escalation.... The Obama administration has so far been unable or unwilling to act on its own oft-repeated understanding that ‘there is no military solution’ to the so-called IS crisis. Instead, the U.S. strategy has relied almost solely on military action.”

While fighting the Islamic State, a contradictory Obama objective is the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, which at this stage would require the defeat of the Syrian army and a victory for the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda’s powerful franchise in Syria) and various other Sunni jihadist fighting groups who lately have been getting close to al-Nusra. These two organizations are blood rivals that could end up in a vicious war or merge into the most dangerous jihadi group of all.

Obama’s desire to bring about regime change in Syria has nothing to do with democracy, although that was Washington’s original justification three years ago. Syria under Assad is a very close ally to Iran and is supported by Russia. Breaking the alliance with Iran by replacing Assad with a leader acceptable to the U.S. would weaken the influence of both Iran and Russia — a feather not only in America’s cap but those of Saudi Arabia, Israel and many Sunni states in the region.

The natural allies of Iran (a Shi’ite majority state) are Iraq (Shi’ite majority), and Syria (Alawite, Shi’ite derived and governed in a 60% Sunni population). All three have a major stake in defeating IS, al-Nusra and other Sunni jihadist groups that consider the Shia minority to be heathens. The Shi’ites are an often-despised minority within Islam, and amount to about 10-13% of the Muslim world.

Both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia share the objective of disrupting the contiguous 1,200-mile East to West Iran-Iraq-Syria coalition that refuses to succumb to American hegemony and

imperialism.

The opposition to Shia influence in the Middle East is led by the Saudi monarchy, the principal exponent of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi Islam — a faith that has been embraced by a number of Sunni extremist groups. Saudi Arabia has been under U.S. protection for almost 70 years because of its enormous oil resources. Most Sunni states in the region appear allied with Riyadh (the Saudi capital) in its desire to limit the regional influence of Shiism.

The reason Saudi Arabia has been bombing Yemen (with U.S. backing) for nearly three months is to defeat the Houthi insurgency, mainly because this group adheres to the Zaidi sect of the Shia religion. (Yemen is 50-55% Sunni and 42%-47% Shi'ite.) In addition, the Houthis in power would be unlikely to take orders from its neighboring monarchy. So far the Saudi air force has killed about 2,500 civilians, largely Shia. The UN says the Saudi attacks have created a humanitarian disaster for about 80% of the Yemeni population, some 20 million people. So far at least eight regional Sunni states have sent jets to join the Saudi onslaught.

Saudi Arabia launched its air war and blockade on March 23 near the end of peace talks between the Houthis and various other Yemeni factions that seemed to be heading toward a positive resolution. The attacks ended the talks and the Houthi rebellion is continuing. On June 14 the rebels seized Hazm, a provincial capital in the northwest. The New York Times reported that the capture of Hazm “appeared to give the Houthis another bargaining chip in United Nations-sponsored peace talks that begin June 15 in Geneva.” It has been reported that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), headquartered in Yemen, has become stronger as a result of the Saudi war, acquiring more territory and obtaining backing from some local Sunni groups.

Much bigger news about AQAP was released June 15 when it confirmed the death of its leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen. This raises an odd question: Wuhayshi was also second in command to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who replaced Osama bin-Laden four years ago. Washington has been seeking to assassinate Zawahiri for years, but there may be a reason to change plans, according to Barak Mendelsohn three months ago in a March 9 article in Foreign Affairs titled “Accepting al-Qaeda.” He wrote:

If and when Washington succeeds in killing Zawahiri, the leaders of al-Qaeda's branches would have the opportunity to reassess whether to remain with al-Qaeda or join Baghdadi's caliphate. [The reference is to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's Caliph.] It is possible that Zawahiri's successor will be able to hold al-Qaeda together, particularly if it is Nasir al-Wuhayshi, al-Qaeda's so-called general manager and the head of its Yemeni branch. But it is more likely that in Zawahiri's absence, al-Qaeda would drift into IS' camp, offering it manpower, resources, and access to arenas such as Algeria and Yemen where al-Qaeda's dominance has so far hindered IS' expansion.

Time will tell.

The struggle against IS would be considerably more difficult were it not for the fighting by the non-Arab Iraqi Kurds and Iraqi Shia militias, the latter usually led by Iranian officers. Baghdad's demoralized, poorly led army is being retrained and is not ready take the field,

except for a few special units. The U.S. supplies the Kurds but has not provided support to the militias and Iranians.

In addition to the Iraqi fighters, the Syrian army is a strong ground force willing to fight the Islamic State — and is actually doing so defensively to prevent the Baghdad government from being crushed. So far the White House extends its air war support to Syrian Kurds in the north of the country, but refuses to back the besieged Syrian army by extending its bombing campaign to the jihadi forces battling their way toward Damascus in the south.

The U.S. has reduced its public effusions of support for the Syrian rebels —the largely jihadist forces that seek to overthrow the Assad government — but it remains involved in trying to destroy the Damascus regime. Stratfor wrote June 5:

Washington can see the battlefield momentum lies with an array of radical Islamists who will demonize the United States along with the Syrian government. Though the United States is working more closely with regional players Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan in selectively sponsoring Syrian rebel factions, it cannot effectively channel the direction of the fight against the Islamic State when that goal is competing with the aim of toppling Iran's ally in Damascus and strangling Hezbollah in Lebanon — a tantalizing prospect for the Sunni powers of the region.

As such, the Obama Administration is in effect subverting the war against the Islamic State. It offers nothing but malice and subversion to the Damascus government and the Syrian army. Were Obama more interested in eliminating jihadist violence against Syria and Iraq than in protecting its geopolitical interests and pandering to powerful anti-Iranian and anti-Syrian political interests in the U.S. and Middle East, he would aid and support the Syrian army's battle against invading jihadists.

The Islamic State has made some stunning advances in Syria since the beginning of this year, culminating with the capture of the ancient city of Palmyra. The IS now controls half of Syrian territory and is moving toward the strategic city of Aleppo and a handful of other core territories leading to the gates of Damascus.

Simultaneously, Al-Nusra has proven itself to be nearly as brutal as the Islamic State. Writing in *The Independent* (UK) June 14, Patrick Cockburn revealed: "Last week fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, entered a village in Idlib province in the north-west of the country and shot dead at least 20 villagers from the Druze community. They had earlier forcibly converted hundreds of Druze to their fundamentalist variant of Sunni Islam.

"The incident happened in the Druze village of Qalb Lawzeh in the Jabal al-Summaq region, a place where al-Nusra fighters have dug up historic graves and destroyed shrines in recent months, according to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It says Nusra first tried to confiscate the house of a Druze government official and shot one villager dead. Another villager then seized a fighter's weapon and killed him. Nusra then sent reinforcements into the village and they opened fire....

A reason why Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, another hard-line jihadi group, were able to break the military stalemate is the greater support they are getting from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Since succeeding to the throne in

January, Saudi King Salman, along with other Sunni leaders, has pursued a more aggressive policy in backing extreme jihadi rebels in Syria.

It is clear that Nusra is now functioning as the leader of the non-IS fighters in Syria who are receiving the bulk of support from America's closest regional allies while the Obama Administration keeps silent. In effect, U.S. allies, and by extension Washington itself, are subsidizing al-Qaeda.

One has to wonder what in the world the White House is up to in the Middle East — unless this, unbelievably, *is* Obama's missing strategy.

Meanwhile, Syria and Iran's biggest foreign backer, Russia, is working toward a diplomatic solution if one is possible. It has been doing so for at least two years but the situation in Syria is so desperate there may be grounds for a settlement.

Stratfor also noted June 5:

Just as Russia swooped in with an exit strategy for the United States in 2013 when it presented a plan to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, it is now trying to draw the United States into a political settlement on Syria that will preserve an Alawite-heavy government, even if Assad does not lead it. To that end, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, who owns the Syria file in the Kremlin, has been trying to organize a Geneva conference that would include both Sunni regional players and Iran to work toward a power-sharing agreement.

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