

HOW TO LOSE A WAR: WHEN YOUR ALLIES ARE YOUR ENEMIES

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"It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliance with any portion of the foreign world."

-George Washington, Farewell Address

"Be careful of your enemy once and of your friend a thousand times, for a double crossing friend knows more evil."

-Arabic Proverb

On September 12, ISIS established an agreement with moderate-in-comparison Syrian rebels to not fight each other so that they can focus on destroying the Syrian government.¹ As early as 2013, Jane's Intelligence had already established that nearly half of the Syrian rebels were jihadis affiliated with al-Qaeda, Jabhat al Nursra and ISIS. As Charles Lister observed, "The insurgency is now dominated by groups which have at least an Islamist viewpoint on the conflict. The idea that it is mostly secular groups leading the opposition is just not borne out."² In retrospect, the "Free Syrian Army" was nothing more than "a Qatari myth."³ Regardless, on September 18, the Senate passed a redundant bill supporting Obama's plan to fund, train and arm the mysterious 'moderate' Syrian rebels –ostensibly to battle the Islamic State and the Syrian government. Displaying his characteristic indifference to reality, upon the bill's passing, Obama declared, "When you harm our citizens, when you threaten the United States, when you threaten our allies, it doesn't divide us, it unites us."⁴

Even by Obama's standards, this was a bit rich. After all, it was ISIS, which benefitted greatly from Saudi policy in Iraq and Syria,⁵ that murdered American journalist James Foley only four weeks earlier –reminding the world that America's most dominant ally has been supporting jihadi groups that not only terrorize innocent people in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, but more famously, Americans themselves—as the unprecedented terrorist attacks of 9/11 show. Moreover, the United States and its allies have already been funding, training and arming the Syrian rebels from the outset of the civil war –a proxy war waged by the Gulf countries against Iran and non-Sunnis in the region.⁶

Saudi Arabia of course, is not the only ally which supports violent jihadi groups on an international scale. Other allies that aid and abet terrorists and foreign fighters include Qatar, Turkey, and Kuwait -with no sanction whatsoever from the United States. On the contrary, they enjoy generous political and economic solidarity, shape American foreign policy and have successfully subverted the American military into a kind of foreign legion of the Gulf states, drawing the United States into perpetual wars against governments and nations that pose no security threats to America. Such wars not only squander American lives, resources and reputation but also distract and impede the United States from comprehensively combating the genuine security threats of international jihad.

Over two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson stated: "Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations-entangling alliances with none."⁷ In this context, it is crucial to assess the nature of American alliances today and rectify relationships that threaten American security and interests. To truly combat this threat, it is important to first review the nature and status of American alliances and second, to understand how the United States' own democratic deficits allowed it to become a leader not of its own interests but a military and foreign policy tool of its allies –a subordinate hatchet man to its powerful friends rather than an equal partner representing the interests and principles of its own people.

SAUDIA ARABIA

"ISIS has been a Saudi project."
-Qatari official.⁸

"If you can kill a disbelieving American or European...rely upon Allah, and kill him"
- Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, ISIS Spokesman

Only a day before the bill was passed, on September 17, 2014, Mufid Elfgeeh, a naturalized American citizen from Yemen, was indicted by a grand jury for attempting to buy two handguns, recruit fighters for ISIS, kill members of the U.S. military and the Shia community, and for illegally possessing firearms silencers. Authorities said Elfgeeh also described his plan to go on a shooting spree of returning U.S. military members to support ISIS.⁹

Ironically enough, the United States may indict its own citizens for supporting terrorist groups like ISIS, but studiously refuses to indict its own allies for doing the same. In one short year, ISIS made remarkable strides both in Syria and neighboring Iraq, all but marginalizing the rebels and establishing a strong base in both countries. ISIS, an al-Qaeda offshoot that later eclipsed al-Qaeda and is now competing with it, owes its rapid expansion in no small part to the aid and arms provided to them by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey under the umbrella of the "Free Syrian Army."¹⁰ Recently, Conflict Armament Research revealed that weapons ostensibly intended for 'moderate rebel groups' found their way to ISIS who disposed of "significant quantities" of US-made small arms including M16 assault rifles. It also reported that anti-tank rockets used by ISIS in Syria were identical to M79 rockets transferred by Saudi Arabia to forces operating under the Free Syrian Army umbrella in 2013. According to Conflict Armament Research, the weapons were either captured or acquired by former FSA fighters as they joined ISIS.¹¹

Access to arms is not the only manner by which Saudi Arabia has helped organizations like ISIS to flourish. In 2007, Stuart Levey, the Under-Secretary of the US Treasury in charge of monitoring and impeding terror financing said that when it came to al-Qaeda, “if I could somehow snap my fingers and cut off the funding from one country, it would be Saudi Arabia.” He also pointed out that not a single person identified by the United States or the United Nations as funder for terrorism had been prosecuted by the Saudis.¹² Two years later, Wikileaks revealed that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote how “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide...Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan] and other terrorists groups.” Clinton also pointed out that when Saudi Arabia engaged in that rare act against al-Qaeda, it was as a domestic threat and not against its activities abroad.¹³

To this day, there has been no stem to the flow of terrorist financing despite the fact that in Saudi Arabia, as well as in other Gulf countries, it is difficult for citizens to provide funds to foreign Islamic causes without government approval. As recently as June, 2014, U.S. Treasury Secretary Jacob J. Lew said that fighting terror financing from the Gulf remains an uphill battle. Moreover, “even small amounts of money that get through have a very substantial impact.” For example, it is estimated that the cost of keeping a fighter in the field in Yemen and Syria is only between \$10 to \$50 dollars a day. According to Theodore Karasik, “terrorist labor expenses are low...Fighters with ISIL and in Yemen aren’t in it for the money. They have a cause, and religious fervor. Plus, the ability to garner battlefield experience is invaluable.”¹⁴

This ‘religious fervor’ that converts young men from all over the world into suicide bombers, oppressors and mass murderers has long been sponsored by Saudi Arabia, who have thus far spent over hundreds of billions on radical madrassas and mosques where impressionable Muslims are indoctrinated into Wahhabi jihad.¹⁵ Churning out a steady supply of enemies to the United States, Ed Husain, a former Islamist activist, explains:

“Over more than two decades, Saudi Arabia has lavished around \$100 billion or more on the worldwide promotion of the violent, intolerant and crudely puritanical Wahhabist sect of Islam that the ruling royal family espouses... Al Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram, the Shabab and others are all violent Sunni Salafi groupings...For five decades, Saudi Arabia has been the official sponsor of Sunni Salafism [another term for Wahhabism] across the globe.”

These Salafist groups, according to Husain, “have been lavishly supported by the Saudi government, which has appointed emissaries to its embassies in Muslim countries who proselytize for Salafism.”¹⁶ Of course, the most famous group of Salafis are the nineteen hijackers of 9/11, fifteen of whom were Saudi Arabian citizens. In the opinion of Senator Bob Graham, the co-chairman of the official 9/11 inquiry and former chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, “the failure to shine a full light on Saudi actions and particularly its involvement in 9/11 has contributed to the Saudi ability to continue to engage in actions that are damaging to the US – and in particular their support for Isis.” Commenting on Bush’s role in keeping information regarding Saudi complicity secret, Senator Bob Graham illustrates the self-defeating nature of U.S. alliances today: “It’s as if the President’s loyalty lay more with Saudi Arabia than with America’s safety.”¹⁷ Following the tradition of his predecessor, President Obama, has yet to publish the redacted twenty-eight pages of the 9/11 Commission Report that allegedly implicate Saudi involvement in 911 –despite promising to do so in his re-election campaign.¹⁸

KUWAIT

Since the first Gulf War, Salafists have enjoyed a strong foothold in Kuwait, which is now described as a Western Union outlet for Syrian mujahideen. According to Zoltan Pall:

‘In the past two decades the different Kuwaiti Salafi groups have been among the most important bankrollers of the Salafi movement worldwide. Kuwaiti Salafi charities and individual donors are financing the building and maintenance of thousands of Salafi mosques and other institutions worldwide. The reach of Kuwaiti Salafi groups increased after the Arab Spring, when they became prominent among the main sponsors of the Syrian rebel groups.’¹⁹

Without mincing his words, David S. Cohen, the Treasury Under Secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence points out, “our ally Kuwait has become the epicentre for fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria” and that “the Kuwaitis could be doing a lot more on this issue.”²⁰ Cohen also says that Kuwait posed the region’s biggest problem of financing linked to mujahideen in Syria while American pressure on Kuwait remained largely fruitless.²¹ Andrew Tabler, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy conceded, ‘Everybody knows the money is going through Kuwait and that it’s coming from the Arab Gulf...Kuwait’s banking system and its money changers have long been a huge problem because they are a major conduit for money to extremist groups in Syria and now Iraq.’²² A report by Brookings asserts that: “Over the last two and a half years, Kuwait has emerged as a financing and organizational hub for charities and individuals supporting Syria’s myriad rebel groups... Today, there is evidence that Kuwaiti donors have backed rebels who have committed atrocities and who are either directly linked to al-Qaeda or cooperate with its affiliated brigades on the ground.”²³ Ghanim al-Mteiri, a former soldier in the Kuwaiti Army and a fundraiser for the al-Nusra Front, explains his stance like this: “Once upon a time we cooperated with the Americans in Iraq... Now we want to get Bashar out of Syria, so why not cooperate with Al Qaeda?”²⁴ By the dint of Kuwaiti inaction, it appears that the government shares this mentality as well.

QATAR

“That’s essentially what Qatar has long offered its friends: a platform, with access to money, media, and political capital. Washington has so far played along, but the question is whether the United States is actually getting played.”

-Elizabeth Dickinson on Qatar’s relationship with its jihadi friends.²⁵

If ISIS is Saudi Arabia’s “project,” Jabhat al Nusra/al Qaeda is Qatar’s own investment in what is a double-pronged attack from the Gulf against Syria on their road to Iran. David Cohen, the U.S. Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence describes Qatar as a “permissive jurisdiction”

for donors funding foreign jihadi fighters in Syria.²⁶ According to a senior Qatari official, Qatar's military and financial largesse towards Jabhat al-Nusra is so integral that he says he can identify al-Nusra commanders simply by the blocks they control in various Syrian cities.²⁷ Daniel Byman, of the Brookings Institute points out:

“It's often individual Qataris, some with government links, who are providing the funding for jihadists. But that doesn't mean you can absolve the government... They have not put significant barriers in the way of this kind of thing – and a lot of people believe the government has, in fact, allowed it to happen.”²⁸

To illustrate, Qatar has also played a game of “Catch and Release” with individuals wanted by their allies for involvement in terrorism. For example, in a Guardian article titled “How Qatar is Funding the Rise of Islamist Extremists,” it was revealed that Ibrahim al-Bakr, a 37 year old Qatari identified by the US treasury as a key link between al-Qaeda's leadership in Pakistan and Gulf financiers, was briefly jailed “for his involvement in a jihadist network” only to be released after he promised “not to conduct terrorist activity in Qatar.” Upon his release, al-Bakr promptly joined a cell that planned to attack US military bases in Qatar.²⁹ On August 20, Qatar's barely veiled support for terrorist groups finally led the German Development Minister Gerd Mueller to openly accuse Qatar of financing the Islamic State militants: “This kind of conflict, this kind of a crisis always has a history ... The ISIS troops, the weapons - these are lost sons, with some of them from Iraq... You have to ask who is arming, who is financing ISIS troops. The keyword there is Qatar - and how do we deal with these people and states politically?”³⁰

Competing with Saudi Arabia for regional influence yet united in its anti-Shia goals, for years, Qatar has supported Islamist groups around the region by providing safe haven, diplomatic mediation, financial aid and even weapons.³¹ Aside from Libya and Syria, Qatar's network of proxy militaries also includes Taliban insurgents, Somali Islamists, and Sudanese rebels.³² Due to the stage managing of foreign terrorists by Gulf countries, Libya, like Iraq before it and Syria today, are three countries that have transformed from viable states with considerable women's rights to becoming the ‘Woodstock of terrorist scumbags.’³³ Even AQIM and Boko Haram³⁴ acquired weapons from Libya,³⁵ where mujahideen were likewise empowered by the Gulf axis to wage war against the Libyan state until it is destroyed,³⁶ leaving a vacuum for more Islamist fighters and further foreign military intervention from the Gulf and other countries.³⁷ It was these very same mujahideen who assassinated Ambassador Chris Stevens, who may or may not have been smuggling weapons from Libya to rebels in Syria.³⁸ Despite Qatar's foreign policy of funding enemies of the United States and visiting destruction on nations via their proxies, the State Department describes Qatar as “a valuable partner to the United States” and plays a positive and “influential role in the region through a period of great transformation. Together, we support progress, stability and prosperity in the region.”³⁹ In light of Qatar's sponsorship of extremist groups, such a Kafkaesque assessment of the American-Qatari alliance by the State Department itself points to a flawed and confused political environment in Washington.

TURKEY

Ignoring the United States, Turkey, a member of NATO, has directly supported Jabhat al Nusra, promoting it as the most effective force against the Syrian government and previously complaining that its designation as a terrorist organization was “premature.”⁴⁰ Former U.S. ambassador to Ankara Francis Ricciardone told journalists that Turkish authorities work with Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda offshoot, as well as hardline Salafi Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham. Mr Ricciardone said that the Turks refused to close their borders to the groups: “We ultimately had no choice but to agree to disagree...The Turks frankly worked with groups for a period, including al-Nusra, whom we finally designated as [being groups] we're not willing to work with.”⁴¹ From the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Turkey allowed its borders to be used as a conduit for aid, weapons and volunteers heading to support Syrian rebels whose status as “moderate” or extremists had not been distinguished.⁴² Abu Abdallah, a mover and shaker who transports arms, money and humanitarian aid for the Syrian rebel explains how America’s allies can shape American foreign policy:

“We reached a point in the fighting, in spring 2012, when we needed proper support. We needed heavy machine guns, real weapons. Money was never an issue: how much do you want? Fifty million dollars, a hundred million dollars – not a problem. But heavy weapons were becoming hard to find: the Turks – and without them this revolution wouldn’t have started – wanted the Americans to give them the green light before they would allow us to ship the weapons. We had to persuade Saad al-Hariri, Rafic Hariri’s son and a former prime minister, to go to put pressure on the Saudis, to tell them: “You abandoned the Sunnis of Iraq and you lost a country to Iran. If you do the same thing again you won’t only lose Syria, but Lebanon with it.”” The idea was that the Saudis in turn would pressure the Americans to give the Turks the green light to allow proper weapons into the country.”⁴³

Today, ISIS has also found a fertile recruiting ground in the suburbs of Istanbul.⁴⁴ According to the New York Times, “one of the biggest source of (ISIS) recruits is neighboring Turkey” with around 1,000 Turks having joined ISIS.⁴⁵ On September 22, 2014, Erdogan also revealed that “six thousand foreign fighters have entered Turkey” despite being “banned.”⁴⁶ Turkey, like the United States, is not immune from the blowback stoked by their mutual Gulf allies and the ill-conceived mimicking of their policies: currently, Turkey has deployed soldiers on their Syrian border in the face of rapid ISIS advance and will likely join in direct military operations in Syria and Iraq⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Writing in Foreign Affairs over four decades ago, David Fromkin, author of *A Peace to End All Peace*, explains,

‘Contrary to what appears a widespread misapprehension, there is no outstanding de jure commitment by the United States, whether by treaty or otherwise, to go to war in defense of any foreign nation or nations whatsoever. A review of our alliance commitments has shown that we

have no legal obligations to defend our allies, but that we do have substantial political and military commitments to friendly nations throughout the world.”⁴⁸

The key then, is to determine which nation is friendly and which is not. Needless to say, nations that create, nurture, fund and arm your designated enemies do not qualify as ‘friendly,’ even when making allowances for ‘real politics’ and the constraints of economic necessity. The Gulf strategy of allowing ISIS to flourish until a demand arises that something must be done, has proven to be an especially brilliant backdoor for the Gulf countries to insert themselves overtly in Syria precisely because the airstrikes against ISIS are bound to be ineffective, which will inevitably lead to boots on the ground—mostly American boots that is. According to Lina Khatib, the director of Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut notes:

“Before the coalition's campaign began, ISIS bases in Raqqa and elsewhere were evacuated and the group's members went underground. The raids that have been conducted to date have led to little actual damage to ISIS' military capability, according .to one of my informants on the ground there. If anything, they have played right into the hands of its strategy.”⁴⁹

Tarek Fateh, author of *Chasing a Mirage: The Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State* concurs: “This was not a coalition that will defeat ISIS; it was a coalition that will end up reinforcing Islamic State as the one true answer to the crimes being committed against the Arab people by its own leaders.”⁵⁰ Capturing the self-defeating nature of American policy in the Middle East, the US Central Command confirms that already, the United States has blown up over forty of the Humvees they had supplied to the Iraqi military. The U.S. Defense Department comments how “in some cases, we have seen instances of ISIL capturing and employing U.S.-made equipment...When we've seen these terrorists employing this equipment, we've sought to eliminate that threat.” According to Todd Harrison, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, the U.S. is sending \$30,000-bombs to eliminate these armored vehicles, which cost about a quarter of a million dollars each depending what it is equipped with.⁵¹

Speaking to Foreign Policy, Jean-Louis Bruguière, the former head of the EU and U.S. Treasury Department's joint Terrorist Finance Tracking Program says, “The U.S. has the tools to monitor state and state-linked transfers to extremist groups. But intelligence is one thing and the other is how you react...What kind of political decision is the U.S. really able to make against states financing terrorism?”⁵² As vile and deserving as ISIS is of any military action against it, there has been no discussion regarding holding any of the Gulf countries accountable for supporting terrorist organizations that the United States is now expending its resources fighting against. Likewise, there has been no discussion regarding the most fundamental of questions: Why is the United States in Syria in the first place and how and why did it allow itself to be complicit and engaged in this cyclical and perpetual imbroglio? What are the long-term consequences and likely outcome of this bombing? Which other countries/groups in the region are better equipped to fight ISIS? Remarkably, the United States also agreed to Saudi Arabia's plan to host training camps for Syrian rebels,⁵³ despite the likely consequence of repeating this policy. In the same spirit, American politicians who promoted and lobbied for foreign policies that aided and abetted these terrorist organizations and cooperation with passive-aggressive allies have thus far escaped any scrutiny—scrutiny an ordinary American citizen would be subject to. Speaking to CNN, retired general Wesley Clark says, “The Saudis have for years funded extremism. Their money's all over the region...The Saudi monarchy has bought billions of dollars' worth of U.S. weapons over the years and funneled them to extremist groups...It can't be exporting extremism and at the same time ask the United States to protect it.”⁵⁴

Witnessing the absurdity and disastrous foreign policy of the United States since 9/11, some have attributed these series of failures to the government's "lacking intelligence and intelligence."⁵⁵ This is not entirely accurate or fair. The foreign policy disasters are the result of a larger political system that allows American leaders and elite to prioritize the foreign policy objectives of its unfriendly allies over the interests of its own constituents. In this context, the United States must review to whom and why it is committed and utilize and act upon their vast intelligence resources in a manner that will serve the interests of their own country rather than the interests of a select group of foreigners and their local representatives. The second part of this paper will show how America's logic-defying foreign policy in the Middle East is not for the lack of intelligence resources but because of its self-defeating relationships to its allies, and how ultimately, "American" strategy is barely American at all.

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