

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Keep U.S. Military Home: Washington is Bigger Threat than Iran to Mideast Stability

Doug Bandow

May 1, 2015

The Obama administration's decision to negotiate with Tehran triggered near hysteria among U.S. politicians and pundits who advocate perpetual war in the Middle East. One complaint is that the talks were not broad enough. They did not address Iran's malign intervention throughout the Middle East.

These critics denounced Tehran's imperial ambitions. For instance, the ever-hawkish Foreign Policy Initiative insisted that "Iran's drive to dominate the region has been years in the making." The group warned of Sana'a becoming "the fourth Arab capital to fall under the sway of Tehran." The *Economist* put it slightly differently, pointing to Iran's "strong influence over Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sana'a."

However, if regional domination is a long-term priority, it is striking how little Tehran has accomplished. Most governments in the region dislike and oppose the Islamic regime. Nor is Iran much of a dominatrix, especially compared to America with its strong influence throughout the entire Persian Gulf and North Africa and in Iraq and Jordan; Saudi Arabia's equally significant role in the Gulf and Egypt and among Syrian rebels; and Israel's overwhelming regional military strength.

Tehran's principal client is war-torn Syria, where the Assad regime's, and thus Iran's, reach barely extends to the Damascus suburbs. Tehran enjoys outsize but not overwhelming influence in small, divided Lebanon, where Hezbollah listens to but is not controlled by Iran (and does nothing to threaten America). In Yemen Tehran is loosely connected to a long-time disaffected rebel movement in what amounts to a permanent civil war.

Iran matters in Baghdad not because of calculated policy but cultural connection, facilitated by George W. Bush, who removed Iraqi secularist Saddam Hussein, Iran's great nemesis. FPI complained that "Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Tehran has worked relentlessly to turn Iraq into a client state led by Shiite militants," but the U.S. occupied Iraq from 2003 until 2011 and worked equally hard, though less successfully, to turn that nation into an American client hosting

military bases for use against Iran. The *Economist* denounced Iran for sponsoring militias in Iraq--which have battled the Islamic State at Baghdad's request. Iraq's relationship with Iran is one of the heart; the ties with Washington were and always will be ones of convenience.

Yet the *Economist* magazine warned that "Iran's belligerent behavior in the Middle East is an increasing menace." Even without nukes, argued consultant Michael McBride, "Iran will continue to pose the greatest threat to our interests, allies, and influence in the region." Then-Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal complained of "the nature of action and hegemonistic tendencies that Iran has taken in the region." More specifically, wrote columnist Jonah Goldberg: "A civilized Iranian regime would presumably stop supporting Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, Bashar Assad in Syria and Shiite militants in Iraq."

But none of these activities have yielded much geopolitical benefit. Anyway, Iran is a populous and potentially prosperous nation that cannot be expected to supinely accept U.S. or Saudi domination. Perhaps Tehran should ask in return that more humane U.S. and Saudi Arabia governments stop backing multiple allies, friends, and proxies, including flagrant authoritarians and extremists, and warring against various enemies and adversaries, including indigenous democracy and independence movements, in the region. Who is dominating whom?

Of course, no one wants Iran to have a nuclear weapon. But given the region's hostile security environment it's hard to blame Tehran for proceeding with a nuclear program--which actually began under Washington's ally the Shah. Not only did Britain and the Soviet Union occupy neutral Iran during World War II, but the U.S. and Britain ousted post-war Iran's democratically elected prime minister in 1953. After the Shah's fall in 1979 the U.S. backed Saddam Hussein's savage invasion of Iran. Over the years Washington imposed regime change or dismembered territories in countries posing no threat to America, such as Haiti, Grenada, Panama, Serbia, Iraq, and Libya. The Arab world is dominated by Sunni regimes hostile to Tehran, whose Shia peoples are a decided minority within Islam. The U.S., Turkey, and the Gulf States are attempting to oust Iran's ally in next-door Syria. Over the last decade successive American presidents have regularly threatened military action against Tehran. So has Israel. As Henry Kissinger once observed, even paranoids have enemies.

Of course, the existing Iranian regime is ugly. It oppresses its own people, limits political dissent, targets religious minorities, spews venomous rhetoric on Israel, and harms neighboring peoples, most notably the Lebanese and Syrians. However, far from being an aggressive empire-builder, the Islamist regime has been a cautious actor dedicated to its own survival. Iran is ringed by U.S. military bases and, unlike the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia, has not bombed, invaded, or occupied another country in the region. Tehran has supported America in Afghanistan and indirectly collaborated with Washington against the Islamic State. Iran mimicked the U.S., Riyadh, and others when intervening in Syria, only on behalf of rather than against Syrian president Bashar Assad. In contrast to the Saudis, Iran's involvement in Yemen is minor at most. Tehran has done nothing nearly as disastrous in humanitarian or geopolitical terms as the Bush administration's invasion of Iran.

Moreover, by almost every measure Saudi Arabia's monarchy is worse than Iran's theocracy. Saudi scholar Awadh al-Badi argued: "Iranian interference in Arab States' internal affairs on a

sectarian basis is destroying the social fabric of Arab societies in certain countries." This is the pot famously calling the kettle black. Riyadh routinely intervenes in Arab states' internal affairs--promoting fundamentalist Islam everywhere, supporting dictatorship in Bahrain and Egypt, underwriting radical insurgents in Syria, squelching independent action by Gulf neighbors, and bombing Yemenis who oppose the Saudi royals' latest political client. Al-Badi insisted on Iran "abandoning its destructive policies and adapting new ones that seeks peace, security and cooperation in the region." Which would mean accepting Riyadh's destructive policies.

Yet Saudi Arabia allows no political opposition and fails to make even a pretense of holding elections. The Saudi government last year sentenced a dissident blogger to 1000 lashes and ten years in prison--and then sent his lawyer to jail for 15 years. In Iran ballots actually matter, as Hassan Rouhani's election as president demonstrated. Public political differences are limited but nevertheless exist in Tehran. Riyadh suppresses all non-Sunni faiths: not one church or synagogue is open in the entire Kingdom. In Iran there are religious freedoms to violate.

Saudi Arabia has promoted the intolerant Wahhabist theology around the world. The Kingdom matches the Islamic State in fondness for treating women as objects and beheading citizens. Riyadh was one of only three governments to recognize the Taliban in Afghanistan. Saudis funded al-Qaeda prior to 9/11 and provided 15 of the 19 9/11 terrorists. More recently the Saudi government underwrote the most extreme Syrian rebels, the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front and apparently even the Islamic State. A 2009 Wikileaks document quoted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reporting that "Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide." While denouncing Iran for acting to sustain its neighboring ally, Syria, Riyadh intervened militarily to buttress Bahrain's repressive Sunni monarchy next door to Saudi Arabia. Now the latter is bombing Yemeni insurgents who challenge Riyadh's influence.

Yet U.S. officials exhibit slavish obsequiousness when dealing with the Kingdom. At Saudi Arabia's behest, America entered another tragic yet irrelevant Middle Eastern war. Washington is providing intelligence and logistical aid and recently accelerated arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states as they kill Yemenis. The administration also is lending the U.S. Navy to Riyadh to help blockade Yemen. Explained Secretary of State John Kerry: "we're not going to step away from our alliances and our friendships."

Until now Yemen was a local affair. Journalist Peter Salisbury described the conflict as "driven by local issues and competition for resources rather than regional or ideological rivalries." The country long was divided in two and unified only in 1990. Since then Yemen has faced civil war, political strife, organized kidnappings, and international terrorism, especially from the once potent al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

A decade ago President and U.S. friend Ali Abdullah Saleh used American weapons, supplied for use against AQAP, in a campaign to suppress the Houthis, northerners of a Shia-variant (Zaydi) with doctrinal Sunni characteristics as well. But after Saleh was ousted in 2012 he flipped to back the Houthi rebels, who last fall overthrew Saleh's successor, President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. While the Houthis have few good feelings for America, their grievances are purely domestic and they heartily dislike AQAP and the Islamic State. The Jamestown

Foundation's James Brandon explained: "the ongoing Yemeni internal conflict is better understood as a struggle for power between two diverse coalitions, both of which incorporate a wide range of both Sunni and Shia elements. Self-interest, and not sectarian affiliation, is therefore the driving force behind much of the ongoing violence."

But Riyadh now is running a ten-nation operation against the Houthis--highlighted by Washington's support. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter spoke of Saudi Arabia "defending its own borders" and seeking "to protect its own security," even though the Houthis evidence no external ambitions, and attempting to "restore stability in Yemen," which has never existed. Riyadh said it wanted to reinstate the "legitimate government" of president Hadi, but his authority shrank before his ouster and popularity disappeared after his flight to Riyadh and support for Saudi intervention. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed: "Saudi Arabia is sending a strong message to the Houthis and their allies that they cannot overrun Yemen by force." Even as Washington and Riyadh are backing rebels in Syria dedicated to overrunning that country by force.

Ironically, the Saudi campaign left the Houthis with little choice but to seek aid from Tehran. Secretary Kerry spoke of aiding "those who feel threatened as a consequence of the choices that Iran might be making," but Houthi dissatisfaction had nothing to do with Tehran. After Riyadh turned Yemen into a proxy war Iran stepped up its support. But apparently mostly money and oil; there is no evidence of direct Iranian military involvement. Indeed, filmmaker Safa al-Ahmad, who recently released a documentary on the Houthis, noted that they "don't need Iranians to bring them weapons. They're awash in weapons." U.S. embassy personnel made the same point in 2009 according to a Wikileaks cable. Brookings' Kenneth Pollack concluded that Iranian support is "being considerably exaggerated." Even British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond acknowledged that "the Houthis are clearly not Iranian proxies."

The conflict will be ugly. The Houthis have been fighting for years and know guerrilla warfare. Egypt intervened in the 1960s with ground forces--as many as 85,000 soldiers at the peak--before withdrawing in defeat. Cairo still considers that experience its "Vietnam." Six years ago Riyadh launched a bombing campaign against and ground invasion of its southern neighbor, but eventually pulled out after achieving nothing. My Cato institute colleague Emma Ashford warned that the latest U.S.-backed war "will fuel Yemen's internal strife, condemning it to a protracted torment that could rival Syria's four-year-old civil war."

Even nominal "victory" would not likely be stable, but merely the latest round in an extended fight. Saudi Arabia claimed it was killing Yemenis to protect Yemen, but Asher Orkaby of Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies warned: "With each falling bomb, the Yemeni population grows increasingly more sympathetic for the Houthi movement." A reinstated President Hadi would not survive without a permanent Saudi bodyguard.

UN envoy Jamal Benomar warned of a future "Iraq-Libya-Syria" scenario. Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies predicted increased recruiting by radical groups. Already AQAP has taken advantage of the burgeoning conflict, causing Secretary Carter to cite that group's "great gains."

The situation is serious, but Washington policy is almost beyond parody. Announced Secretary Kerry, the U.S. was "not going to stand by while the region is destabilized or while people engage in overt warfare across lines, international boundaries and other countries."

This from a government which routinely bombs, invades, and occupies other nations for any number of perceived infractions. Washington overthrew a democratic Iranian government, intervened in a Lebanese civil war, invaded Iraq, overthrew the Libyan government, worked to oust Syria's secular regime, supported Saudi Arabia as it helped Bahrain suppress democracy protestors, and now is aiding Riyadh as it bombs indigenous rebels in Yemen.

Indeed, America's reach for regional hegemony has had catastrophic consequences for both the U.S. and Middle East. Washington empowered Iran and created the Islamic State by invading Iraq. Washington turned a Libyan government which opposed al-Qaeda into a failed state which hosts the Islamic State. In practice if not rhetoric, Washington is the greatest threat to stability in the Middle East. Iran is a minor player in comparison.

Yet Washington officials can offer no coherent justification for joining another obscure and distant conflict. Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations noted that Gen. Lloyd Austin, in charge of Central Command, admitted that "I don't currently know the specific goals and objectives of the Saudi campaign." How can any good result from participating in this war?

Finally, after negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran the administration is promising even more intensive military involvement in the Middle East. Peacefully resolving differences between Iran and the West and reducing the likelihood of an Iranian nuclear weapon should lower perceived threats against friendly countries. Yet Ilan Berman of the American Foreign Policy Council complained of "a major shift in the regional balance of power" against Washington's allies.

In response, reported the Los Angeles Times, "Obama administration officials are promising a major strengthening of U.S. defense commitments to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf allies, possibly including a nuclear commitment to their security." The president was quoted saying he wanted to "formalize" the U.S. commitment to the region "a little bit more." If reducing the potential Iranian threat actually increases Washington's commitments and the likelihood of going to war, why bother?

Of course the Middle East would be better off without Iranian meddling in other nations' affairs. The region would be even better off with the rise of a liberal, democratic government in Iran. But the Middle East also would be better off without U.S. and Saudi intervention and with the rise of a liberal, democratic state in Riyadh.

Unfortunately, promiscuous American military action, especially on behalf of authoritarian "allies" such as Saudi Arabia, has become a bigger problem than the ills it is supposed to solve. The U.S. should follow up the nuclear deal by proposing discussions with Tehran over its role in regional issues. But at the same time Washington should unilaterally back away from conflicts which are not America's to solve. U.S. intervention and war-making have wreaked untold harm in the Middle East.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. .