

# Yemen Conflict: Blowback of Obama's Botched Syria Policy

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*After Arab Spring protests erupted in the Middle East in 2011, toppling longtime dictators of the Arab World, including Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Yemenis also gathered in the capital's squares demanding removal of Ali Abdullah Saleh.*

Instead of conceding to protesters' fervent demand of holding free and fair elections to ascertain democratic aspirations of demonstrators, however, the Obama administration adopted the convenient course of replacing Yemen's longtime autocrat with a Saudi stooge Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Having the reputation of a "wily Arabian fox" and being a Houthi himself, Ali Abdullah Saleh wasn't the one to sit idly by and retire from politics in ignominy. He colluded with the Houthi rebels and incited them to take advantage of the chaos and political vacuum created after the revolution to come out of their northern Saada stronghold and occupy the capital Sanaa in September 2014.

Meanwhile, while events were unfolding in Yemen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring movements, the Saudi-Iran conflict in the Middle East region was also exacerbating. Saudi Arabia, which was vying for power as the leader of Sunni bloc against the Shia-led Iran in the regional geopolitics, was staunchly against the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration in 2003.

The Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein constituted a Sunni Arab bulwark against Iran's meddling in the Arab World. But after Saddam was ousted from power in 2003 and subsequently when elections were held in Iraq which were swept by Shia-dominated parties, Iraq has now been led by a Shia-majority government that has become a steadfast regional ally of Iran. Consequently, Iran's sphere of influence now extends all the way from territorially contiguous Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast.

The Saudi royal family was resentful of Iran's encroachment on the traditional Arab heartland. Therefore, when protests broke out against the Shia-led Syrian government in the

wake of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, the Gulf States along with their regional Sunni allies, Turkey and Jordan, and the Western patrons gradually militarized the protests to dismantle the Iranian resistance axis comprised of Iran, Syria and their Lebanon-based proxy, Hezbollah.

The decade-long conflict in Syria that gave birth to myriads of militant groups, including the Islamic State, and after the conflict spilled across the border into neighboring Iraq in early 2014 was directly responsible for the spate of Islamic State-inspired terror attacks in the West from 2015 to 2017.

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in August 2011 to June 2014, when the Islamic State overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq, an informal pact existed between the Western powers, their regional Arab and Turk allies and jihadists of the Middle East against the Iranian resistance axis. In accordance with the pact, militants were trained and armed in the training camps located in the border regions of Turkey and Jordan to battle the Syrian government.

This arrangement of an informal pact between the Western powers and the jihadists of the Middle East against the Iran-allied forces worked well up to August 2014, when the Obama Administration made a volte-face on its previous regime change policy in Syria and began conducting air strikes against one group of militants battling the Syrian government, the Islamic State, after the latter overstepped its mandate in Syria and overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq from where the US had withdrawn its troops only a couple of years ago in December 2011.

After this reversal of policy in Syria by the Western powers and the subsequent Russian military intervention on the side of the Syrian government in September 2015, the momentum of jihadists' expansion in Syria and Iraq stalled, and they felt that their Western patrons had committed a treachery against the jihadists' cause, hence they were infuriated and rose up in arms to exact revenge for this betrayal.

If we look at the chain of events, the timing of the spate of terror attacks against the West was critical: the Islamic State overran Mosul in June 2014, the Obama Administration began conducting airstrikes against the Islamic State's targets in Iraq and Syria in August 2014, and after a lull of almost a decade since the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005, respectively, the first such incident of terrorism occurred on the Western soil at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, and then the Islamic State carried out the audacious November 2015 Paris attacks, the March 2016 Brussels bombings, the June 2016 truck-ramming incident in Nice, and three horrific terror attacks took place in the United Kingdom within a span of less than three months in 2017, and after that the Islamic State carried out the Barcelona attack in August 2017, and then another truck-ramming atrocity occurred in Lower Manhattan in October 2017 that was also claimed by the Islamic State.

More to the point, the dilemma that the jihadists and their regional backers faced in Syria was quite unique: in the wake of the false-flag Ghouta chemical weapons attacks in Damascus in August 2013, the stage was all set for yet another no-fly zone and "humanitarian intervention" à la Gaddafi's Libya, as Obama had unequivocally stated that a chemical weapons attack by the Bashar al-Assad government was a "red line" for his administration.

The war hounds were waiting for a finishing blow and then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and former Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan were shuttling between the Western capitals to lobby for the military intervention. Francois Hollande, then the president of France, had already announced his intentions and David Cameron, then the prime minister of the UK, was also onboard.

Here it should be remembered that even during the Libyan intervention, the Obama administration's policy was a bit ambivalent and France under the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy, then the president of France, had taken the lead role. In Syria's case, however, the British parliament forced David Cameron to seek a vote for military intervention in the House of Commons before committing the British troops and air force to Syria.

Taking cue from the British parliament, the US Congress also compelled Obama to seek approval before another ill-conceived military intervention, and since both the administrations lacked the requisite majority in their respective parliaments and the public opinion was also fiercely against another Middle Eastern war, therefore Obama and Cameron dropped their plans of enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria.

In the end, France was left alone as the only Western power still in favor of intervention; at that point, however, the seasoned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov staged a diplomatic coup by announcing that the Syrian government was willing to ship its chemical weapons stockpiles out of Syria and subsequently the issue was amicably resolved.

Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf Arab states, the main beneficiaries of the proxy war against the Baathist government in Syria, however, had lost a golden opportunity to deal a fatal blow to their regional rivals.

To add insult to the injury, the Islamic State, one of the numerous militant outfits fighting in Syria, overstepped its mandate in Syria and overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq in 2014, from where the US troops had withdrawn only a couple of years ago in December 2011.

Additionally, when the graphic images and videos of Islamic State's executions surfaced on the internet, the Obama administration was left with no other choice but to adopt some countermeasures to show that it was still sincere in pursuing Washington's dubious "war on terror" policy; at the same time, however, it assured its Turkish, Jordanian and Gulf Arab allies that despite fighting a war against the maverick jihadist outfit, the Islamic State, the Western policy of training and arming the so-called "moderate" Syrian militants will continue apace and that Bashar al-Assad's days were numbered, one way or the other.

Moreover, declaring the war against the Islamic State in August 2014 served another purpose too: in order to commit the US Air Force to Syria and Iraq, the Obama administration needed the approval of the US Congress which was not available, but by declaring a war against the Islamic State, which was a designated terrorist organization, the Obama administration availed itself of the war on terror provisions in the US laws and thus circumvented the US Congress.

But then Russia threw a spanner in the works of NATO and its regional Middle Eastern allies in September 2015 by its surreptitious military buildup in Latakia that was executed with an element of surprise unheard of since General Rommel, the Desert Fox.

When Russia deployed its forces and military hardware to Syria in September 2015, the

militant proxies of Washington and its regional clients were on the verge of drawing a wedge between Damascus and the Alawite heartland of coastal Latakia, which could have led to the imminent downfall of the Bashar al-Assad government.

With the help of the Russian air power, the Syrian government has since reclaimed most of Syria's territory from the insurgents, excluding Idlib in the northwest occupied by the Turkish-backed militants and Deir al-Zor and the Kurdish-held areas in the east, thus inflicting a humiliating defeat on Washington and its regional clients.

Therefore, although Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf States still toe Washington's line in the region publicly, behind the scenes there is bitter resentment that the US let them down by making an about-face on the previous regime change policy in Syria and the subsequent declaration of war against one group of Sunni militants in Syria, the Islamic State. This change of policy by the US directly benefited the Iranian-led axis in the region.

Coming back to Yemen, after Ali Abdullah Saleh colluded with the Houthi rebels and incited them to take advantage of political vacuum created after the revolution to come out of their northern Saada stronghold and occupy the capital Sanaa in September 2014, meanwhile a change of guard took place in Riyadh as Saudi Arabia's longtime ruler King Abdullah died and was replaced by King Salman in January 2015, while de facto control of the kingdom fell into hands of ambitious and belligerent Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

Already furious at the Obama administration for not enforcing its so-called "red line" by imposing a no-fly zone over Syria after the false-flag Ghouta chemical weapons attacks in Damascus in August 2013 and apprehensive of security threat posed to the kingdom from its southern border along Yemen by Houthi rebels under the influence of Iran, the crown prince immediately began a military and air warfare campaign against regional rivals with military assistance from the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of UAE, Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, in March 2015.

Mindful of the botched policy it had pursued in Libya and Syria and aware of the catastrophe it had wrought in the Middle East region, the Obama administration had to yield to the dictates of Saudi Arabia and UAE by fully coordinating the Gulf-led military campaign in Yemen not only by providing intelligence, planning and logistical support but also by selling billions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition to the Gulf States during the conflict.

After the Democrats lost the presidential election in November 2016, the Yemen conflict has further escalated during four years of Trump presidency, who was on even friendlier terms with the Saudi royal family. In order to appreciate the nature of cordial relationship between the Trump family and the Gulf's petro-monarchs, here are a few relevant excerpts from Bob Woodward's book, *Rage*.

In an informal conversation with Woodward, Trump boasted that he protected Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from congressional scrutiny after the brutal assassination of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. "I saved his ass," Trump said in 2018, according to the book. "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop."

When Woodward pressed Trump if he believed the Saudi crown prince ordered the assassination himself, Trump responded: "He says very strongly that he didn't do it. Bob, they spent \$400 billion over a fairly short period of time," Trump said.

“And you know, they’re in the Middle East. You know, they’re big. Because of their religious monuments, you know, they have the real power. They have the oil, but they also have the great monuments for religion. You know that, right? For that religion,” the president noted. “They wouldn’t last a week if we’re not there, and they know it,” he added.

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