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How US Blunders Strengthened Iran

By Jonathan Marshall

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Behind only North Korea, Iran is the country the Trump administration vilifies most. The White House endorses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's injunction that "We must all stand together to stop Iran's march of conquest, subjugation and terror."

Parroting Netanyahu's claim that Iran is "busy gobbling up the nations" of the Middle East, CIA Director and conservative GOP stalwart Mike Pompeo warned in June that Iran — which he branded "the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism" — now wields "enormous influence . . . that far outstrips where it was six or seven years ago."

In an interview with MSNBC, Pompeo elaborated, "Whether it's the influence they have over the government in Baghdad, whether it's the increasing strength of Hezbollah and Lebanon, their work alongside the Houthis in Iran, (or) the Iraqi Shias that are fighting along now the border in Syria . . . Iran is everywhere throughout the Middle East."

Few would deny that Iran's influence in the region has grown over the past decade. What's missing from such dire warnings of its imperial designs, however, is any reflection on how aggressive policies by the United States and its allies have consistently backfired, creating needless chaos that Iran has exploited as a matter of self-interest and self-defense.

Consider the case of Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shiite organization that Israeli leaders describe as a major threat and almost certainly the target of Israel's next war. Although the Iranian-backed force intervened actively in Syria to back the Assad government, it disclaims any intent to start a war with Israel.

It does, however, declare with great bravado its intent to deter another Israeli invasion of its homeland. "Israel should think a million times before waging any war with Lebanon," said its leader earlier this year.

Spurred by Israeli Invasions

In fact, Hezbollah owes its very existence to Israel's repeated invasions of their country. In 1982, Israel broke a cease-fire with the Palestine Liberation Organization and invaded southern Lebanon with 60,000 troops. The Reagan administration took no steps to stop that invasion, which caused thousands of civilian casualties and turned much of the population against Israel.

With Iranian money and guidance, the Shiite resistance in Lebanon coalesced around the organization that became known as Hezbollah. "We are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation," the group claimed in one of its ideological tracts. "We appealed to the world's conscience, but heard nothing."

Years later, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak conceded that "It was our presence [in Lebanon] that created Hezbollah." Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin seconded that assessment, saying that Israel had let the "genie out of the bottle."

In 2006, Israel again invaded Lebanon, this time to wipe out Hezbollah. Israel's indiscriminate attacks against civilians drew condemnation from international human rights organizations. They also succeeded in strengthening the very enemy Israel sought to annihilate.

"Especially since the 2006 war with Israel, . . . an overwhelming majority of the Shi'a have embraced Hezbollah as the defender of their community," writes Augustus Richard Norton in his study, *Hezbollah: A Short History*. "This suggests that outsiders . . . seeking to reduce Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon must redress the security narrative rather than take steps that validate it."

Instead, of course, the United States and its Sunni Arab and Turkish allies promoted the violent overthrow of Syria's government, drawing Hezbollah forces into the fight for the survival of their longtime ally. While Hezbollah has paid a political and human price for its military expedition, its soldiers have gained tremendous battle experience, making them all the more formidable a foe.

The Iraqi Gift

Washington's greatest geostrategic gift to Iran was the unprovoked U.S. overthrow of Iran's arch enemy, Saddam Hussein, in 2003. Iran had lost hundreds of thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars in an eight-year war with Iraq, triggered by Saddam's invasion in 1980. The

Bush administration not only killed Saddam, but handed political power to Iraq's majority Shiite population, which looked to Iran for spiritual and political guidance.

That windfall may not have been entirely luck. The leading Iraqi lobbyist for war, the neoconservatives' darling Ahmed Chalabi, was later identified by U.S. authorities as a key Iranian intelligence asset. U.S. counterintelligence agents concluded that Chalabi and other Iraqi exiles, who peddled false claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, had "been used as agents of a foreign intelligence service ... to reach into and influence the highest levels of the U.S. government," in the words of a Senate Intelligence Committee report.

But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's office shut down the investigation, leaving Chalabi to direct the political purge of Iraq's government and then become Iraq's deputy prime minister and oil minister. The Chalabi-led purge targeted Iraq's Sunni politicians, aggravating the country's sectarian divide and fueling the insurgency that still plagues the country today. The violence strengthened Iran's hand in the country, as Shiite militia sought Tehran's help to defend their communities.

At the same time, popular opposition to the U.S. occupation led to the rise of radical Sunni terrorists. It was from their swelling ranks in Iraq's prisons that ISIS was born. ISIS made lightning gains across much of western Iraq in June 2014, with the conquest of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul, the country's second most populous city. With its very existence in jeopardy, Iraq's beleaguered government welcomed Iran's immediate dispatch of 2,000 soldiers to help block the ISIS offensive. Syria's air force also began striking ISIS bases in coordination with Baghdad.

Misguided Pressure

Washington, in contrast, rejected Iraq's call for air strikes and suggested that its Shiite-led government should step down to placate aggrieved Sunnis. Only in August 2014 did President Obama authorize limited bombing of ISIS to protect minorities threatened by their military advance. Needless to say, many Iraqis were grateful to Iran for its military support at a critical time.

"The Iranians are playing a long game and a waiting game," said Sajad Jiyad, the director of the Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies in Baghdad. "They put their skins on the line. They lost three or four generals plus a dozen senior officers."

So when a "hamfisted" Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaking in Saudi Arabia, recently demanded that Baghdad send home Iranian-backed paramilitary units that helped defeat ISIS, it didn't go over well with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

"No party has the right to interfere in Iraqi matters," his office stated. Abadi called the Popular Mobilization forces "Iraqi patriots," not mere proxies of Iran, and insisted that they "should be encouraged because they will be the hope of country and the region." Score another few points for Tehran.

ISIS might never have spread into Syria had not the United States publicly promoted the overthrow of the Assad government in 2011, following years of covert efforts by Washington and Israel to weaken the regime and promote sectarian divisions within Syria.

Contributing greatly to the rise of radical Islamist forces in Syria was the U.S.-backed overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, which unleashed large stocks of arms and hundreds of hardened fighters to spread their revolution into Syria.

By late 2011, Sunni-led states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar began financing and arming militant Islamist rebels in Syria, including Al Qaeda and even ISIS. The resulting war killed hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians, uprooted millions of refugees, and laid waste to ancient cities.

The Obama administration proved itself just as deluded as the Bush administration about the efficacy of armed intervention. Describing hopes by the White House that Libya's uprising would "ripple out to other nations in the region" and fuel anti-regime movements in Syria and Iran, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Syria has served for 30 years as Iran's closest strategic ally in the region. U.S. officials believe the growing challenge to Mr. Assad's regime could motivate Iran's democratic forces."

Instead, of course, Syria's conflict prompted Iran's hardliners to send Revolutionary Guard units and Hezbollah forces to the defense of their ally. With the help of Russian air power, they turned the tide in Assad's favor, leaving the Damascus regime intact and greatly in Tehran's debt.

The Yemeni Mess

Echoing longstanding claims by Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration also insists that Iran is a major backer of Houthi tribal forces who swept down from northern Yemen to seize control of most of the country in early 2015. That March, with U.S. backing, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states launched a scorched-earth military campaign to oust the Houthis, in the name of resisting Iran.

The coalition's indiscriminate bombing of industrial and other civilian targets, including schools and hospitals, has laid waste to much of the country and destroyed the economy. Its blockade of ports caused mass hunger and triggered the world's worst cholera epidemic.

"Cynics can argue that the real strategy of the Saudi coalition is to rely on starvation and disease to wear down the Yemeni people," observed former White House adviser and CIA analyst Bruce Riedel. "The United Nations has labeled the war the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world . . . (Yet) Iran is the only winner, as it provides aid and expertise to the Houthis at a tiny fraction of the cost of the Saudi war effort while the Islamic Republic's Gulf enemies spend fortunes on a conflict they jumped into with no endgame or strategy."

Experts point out that Washington picked the wrong ally in this fight. "The Houthis are one of the few groups in the Middle East that has little intention or ability to confront the United States or Israel," writes Harvard lecturer Asher Orkaby. "And far from being aligned with extremists,

the Houthi movement has repeatedly clashed with the Islamic State . . . and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is Saudi Arabia that has long supported Sunni Islamist groups in Yemen.”

To compound the irony, the paranoid sheiks in Riyadh created the very threat they set out to crush with their invasion in 2015. Iranian ties to the Houthis were negligible before then. Remarking on years of attempts to smear them as pawns of Iran, the U.S. ambassador to Yemen reported in a classified cable in 2009, “The fact that . . . there is still no compelling evidence of that link must force us to view this claim with some skepticism.”

Two former members of the State Department’s Office of Policy Planning have recently confirmed that “the vast majority of the Houthi arsenal . . . was seized from Yemeni army stockpiles,” not provided by Iran.

As the devastating war grinds on, however, Iran has provided the Houthis with modest training, advice, and ground munitions. “Iran has exploited, on the cheap, the Saudi-led campaign, and thus made the expansion of Iranian influence in Yemen a Saudi self-fulfilling prophecy,” they observe.

“By catering to the Saudis in Yemen,” they add, “the United States has . . . strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security, brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse, and visited more death, destruction, and displacement on the Yemeni population.”

Qatar and Beyond

In a moment of particular lunacy, President Trump this June tweeted his support for a Saudi-led political and economic blockade of Qatar, a tiny but gas-rich Gulf emirate. Riyadh is aggrieved in part by Qatar’s sponsorship of Al Jazeera, the politically nettlesome broadcaster. Trump’s action surprised and embarrassed the Pentagon, which operates a huge military base in Qatar.

Iran quickly took advantage of this latest Saudi blunder. It opened its airspace to Qatari flights that were barred from crossing the Arabian Peninsula. It shipped food to replace supplies lost by the closure of the Saudi-Qatari border. In gratitude, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Tehran after recalling its ambassador two years ago.

“This dispute has pushed Qatar towards other players in the region who are critical: Iran, Turkey, Russia, China,” said Rob Richer, former Associate Deputy Director for Operations at the CIA. “These are players who now have a lot more influence as we diminish our influence in the region. In this way, the blockade has actually undermined everything that the Saudis and Emiratis wanted by pushing the Qataris into the arms of these other regional players.”

Time after time, in other words, the United States and its regional supporters have made a mess of matters with their overt and covert military interventions in the Middle East. It’s only natural that Iran, having long been targeted by Washington and its allies (sometimes for understandable reasons), tries to seize opportunities to defend its interests.

The lesson we should learn is that curbing Iran and promoting U.S. security interests will require less intervention from afar, not more self-defeating forays into the region.

As Chatham House research fellow Renad Mansour recently observed, until the United States overcomes its counterproductive reactions to obsessive fears of Iranian influence, “the Iranophobes will be right about one thing: Iran is the smarter player in the region.”