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U.S. INFLUENCE DRIP-DRIPPING AWAY

By Adam Garfinkle



Adam Garfinkle is the founding Editor of The American Interest magazine and a member of FPRI's Board of Advisors. He will be speaking to FPRI audiences on The Geopolitics of the Middle East on September 18 to our Princeton Committee and on December 10 at our Main Line Breakfast Briefings.

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In a [post](#) penned on July 29, after a particularly noxious display of U.S. diplomatic malpractice related to the still-persisting Gaza War, I wrote that, “when the U.S. government loses the ability to influence Israel, those Arab parties that want something to do with Israel—but not too much in public—lose interest in Washington. Thus ditto U.S. influence in Cairo and Riyadh, and probably in Amman and Ramallah, too.”

Clearly, I should have added Abu Dhabi, because today’s news that the United Arab Emirates and Egypt teamed up to bomb elements of a Qatari-supported Islamist militia in Tripoli—*without first even informing the U.S. government*—proves the case almost beyond any fiction I might have invented.

If more proof were needed, Mahmud Abbas announced yesterday that a new PLO initiative designed, he said, not to make war but to save the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would be soon forthcoming despite the fact that the United States would not be informed beforehand of its contents, and would probably “not agree with it.” Moreover, the initiative, we were told by Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Abu Amr, would dispense forever more with the U.S. role as prime mediator between the parties in favor of an international conference approach.

As if on cue, right next to the front-page *New York Times* story about the UAE-Egyptian bombing of Libya, was the [headline](#) “Obama Approves Air Surveillance of ISIS in Syria.” One might have thought that, given the circumstances, U.S. air surveillance over Syria had been approved long ago. Maybe surveillance of a different sort had been, and no doubt there is a lot of competition nowadays for intelligence platforms, what with flames shooting out from eastern Ukraine, the South and East China Seas, and elsewhere. Still, if the President ordered successful air strikes against ISIS to help the Kurds and others well over a week ago, and if ISIS is operating in Syria as much or more than in Iraq, why did he wait until this past weekend to connect the dots and give the order? It is this picture of risk-aversion producing such painfully guarded slowness that, together with John Kerry’s general cluelessness, has persuaded just about every leadership cadre in the Middle East that the United States can be safely ignored when its principals make threats or promises. We shall see, it seems likely, whether a substantial U.S.-led military campaign against ISIS can change that perception. It needs to.

But it won’t be easy to pull off, and the military aspect is the least of the challenge. The Administration will not coordinate its effort with the Assad regime, and that is wise, but it still risks, as my friend Fred Hof said the other

day via a *New York Times* quote, running into a political ambush. But there is no mystery in how to handle the problem: Bomb Assad regime assets simultaneously with bombing ISIS assets. That should make the point clearly enough.

Beyond that, coalition management both outside Syria and inside it will be hellaciously complex. For example, one of the countries mentioned publicly as a potential member of an anti-ISIS coalition is Qatar. This Muslim Brotherhood-supporter makes for a strange bedfellow in an anti-Islamist coalition, to say the least. Same goes for Turkey, although the proximity of Turkish air bases and the need for Turkey to tighten its border are critical for long-term success, so one swallows hard and does what needs to be done. As for inside Syria, there are many anti-regime groups that are also anti-ISIS, but the geometry of the conflict is highly muddled. It shifts from locality to locality, personality to personality, and even from day to day. It would be best to establish one internal chain of command with which to liaise, as former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Robert S. Ford, suggests; but it is not clear that this is possible at this point.

Clearly, what's going on in the region is not easy for the average Joe or Jane America to understand. It's a muddled up mess out there, and Americans like their foreign conflicts crisp and plain, with only two sides, good guys and bad guys clearly distinguishable. When the heinous Assad regime fights the heinous ISIS, and the heinous ISIS is also fighting the heinous Jabat al-Nusra al-Qaeda affiliate, and all of them are fighting the Free Syrian Army, which may not be heinous but may be pretty feckless, most Americans can't stop their eyes from glazing over.

And the muddle hardly stops there. Just to take one example, is Turkey an ally of the United States or not? Well, it's a NATO member and its general orientation toward the Kurds has shifted in a potentially positive way in recent months. It also threw in years ago with the general aim of getting rid of the Assad regime in Damascus. But, along with Qatar, it supports Hamas and its leader is perhaps the most prominent raving anti-Semite of our times. Turkish policy was also instrumental back in 2011 and 2012 in feeding the monster that became ISIS, or ISIL, or the Islamic State, or whatever it's calling itself today. It did this through the aegis of its intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, who out of sectarian affinity and an ambition that far exceeded his talents allowed jihadi fanatics to use the Turkish side of the border with Syria in ways that resembled Peshawar *viz* Afghanistan in the 1980s. No doubt the Turks have since realized their mistake, but allies should not make mistakes like that.

Speaking of Qatar, now there is a muddled story most peculiar. Back in that July 29 post I referred to Qatar as a "troublemaking little pissant of a country", but I did not long dwell on all the various ways that the Al-Thani both pisses off and on its neighbors. That its neighbors do not exactly appreciate Qatari policy—and their ire goes way beyond the constant irritation of their sponsoring Al-Jazeera—was illustrated back in early March by the withdrawal in protest of the Saudi, UAE, and Bahraini ambassadors from Doha.

Why'd they leave town? Because the current Qatari Emir made common cause with Turkey to support the Muslim Brotherhood region-wide, whether in Egypt or in Palestine via the Palestinian branch of the MB, known as Hamas. The neighbors also suspected Qatar of running a pro-MB regional intelligence operation. And of course the Al-Thani plays host not only to Khaled Meshal, the political head of Hamas, but also to Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the rabid 87-year old Egyptian cleric in exile whose broadcast sermons are, or cause, often literally life-and-death events back in Egypt. More recently, Qatar reportedly also urged Hamas, via Mr. Meshal in Doha, not to agree to any truce in Gaza with Israel, delaying a firm ceasefire for more than a month, with all the additional and needless destruction and death that entailed. The Saudis, deeply fearful of the MB and dismissive of the Morsi government—and further moved to generously bankroll al-Sisi's Egypt in part to enable it to ignore U.S. advice—were naturally displeased with the upstart Qataris pissing in their foreign policy soup.

Less important to Riyadh and the other GCC capitals in March, the Qataris continued to meddle in Libya. Back in 2011 the Qatari government aided jihadi groups, particularly those in and near Misurata. The UAE and others helped less ideologically oriented tribesmen from Zintan. Both groups of tribesmen eventually converged on the capital and, as the country's weak center began to dissolve into wan rhetoric, violent clashes became more common and more highly fire-powered. The Gulf patrons poured in aid and the tribal battles in Libya gradually took on the character of a proxy war between Qatar and the UAE especially. So when UAE fighter jets struck near Tripoli recently—twice according to the reports—through use of Egyptian air bases, the aim was not only to help the Zintan militiamen but to shove one up Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's you-know-what.

Arab states bombing other Arab states, with still *other* Arab states (not to mention Turkey and Iran) actively playing the odds on the side, is the kind of thing we have not seen on this scale since the Egyptian intervention in the Yemeni Civil War in 1964—or, come to think of it, maybe ever. So as news goes, this is, well, news.

So is, to circle back around to U.S. policy in the region, the Obama Administration's reaction to the UAE-Egyptian strike. Of course, to be blindsided by two countries whose order-of-battle is almost entirely of U.S. origin is a bit irritating, to be kind. (You do have to give the *New York Times* credit here for humor scriptwriting with this line: "It was unclear if the planes or munitions were American-made." Really? Unclear to *whom*?) But even that does not excuse the sheer gall with which Administration spokesmen tagged the attack as counterproductive because the United Nations and Western powers are trying to broker a resolution to Libya's internal strife. (That's right, you heard me: the United Nations...) According to Administration fantasists, a competent and democratically elected Libyan central government exists and is in basic control of the country—excepting maybe a little militia kerfuffle, you know—so outsiders should not be dropping ordnance on warring groups so that the United Nations can work its diplomatic magic. The truth is that Libyan government authorities, such as they are, can't even keep their own international airports open. Will Obama Administration officials next claim to have sighted flying lipsticked pigs over Tripoli?

The UAE-Egyptian mission may not have been militarily effective, but if so it was probably because it was not muscular enough. Besides, the reason Libya has fallen apart, and has become a failed state spreading misery to Mali, Northern Nigeria, and beyond, is because the Obama Administration started a war there and then, along with its feckless allies, failed to stick around to ensure postwar peace and reconstruction. For a bunch of people who had criticized with alacrity the Bush Administration's failure to take so-called Phase IV planning in Iraq seriously, this was a breathtakingly irresponsible error. People who make errors of that magnitude might want to maybe shut up once in a while about what other actors might try to do to rescue what they can of a deteriorating situation.

Joe and Jane America can, however, get the big picture right without too much straining. Muddled though the region is, the basics are fairly simple. Iranian influence through Assad and his thugs in Syria, through Hizballah in Lebanon, and through the hopefully retiring Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, has widened and radicalized sectarian conflict in the region, and the growing weakness of most of the Arab states in the face of this multi-year offensive has led to rogue groups like ISIS taking up the slack. When a government essentially murders going on 200,000 of its own citizens, most of them Sunnis, it is irrational not to expect some kind of reaction among co-religionists when Sunni Arab governments in the region—or anyone else—fail to respond.

This also puts into perspective the offers of first the Iranian government a few weeks ago to put aside other disagreements and help the United States battle ISIS in Iraq, and yesterday's offer via Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem for the Assad regime to help the United States battle ISIS in Syria. What can one say when arsonists impersonate firefighters? One can start by saying "no", and to its credit, as already noted, the Administration understands that any appearance of cooperating with the Assad regime or Iran would dash all hopes of leveraging non-jihadi Sunni power, such as it now is, to end the multiplying Levantine wars breaking out in the still-trembling shatter belt of the fallen Ottoman Empire.

But this whole business of leveraging non-jihadi Sunni power is a sore and embarrassing point in another way. Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby said yesterday that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was "looking at a train-and-equip program for the Free Syrian Army." Umm, didn't Secretary Kerry strongly suggest some months ago, just a short while after the second Geneva meeting on Syria had fallen flat on its face in late January, that exactly such a program had already been vetted? In June didn't President Obama ask Congress for \$500 million for exactly that purpose? So why is the Pentagon talking like it thought up this possibility just yesterday? Could it be that all that has gone before was just so much persiflage and outright deception, designed to shroud the President's determination to do nothing in a haze of appearing to do something?

Joe and Jane America might have one more set of questions, if they've been reasonably attentive to the lay of the land in the Middle East. "Let's see now", Joe might say to Jane, "the Saudis, Egyptians, Emiratis, Israelis, Jordanians, and the Palestinian Authority, too, are all opposed to the kind of jihadi militants that applauded the 9/11 attacks, but the Obama Administration is on bad terms with nearly all those parties." And Jane might respond, "Yes, Joe, that's right; but our Secretary of State is welcome in Qatar and Turkey, whose governments support Muslim Brotherhood militants, not to exclude Hamas, and even more extreme groups besides as far away as Libya,

all of whom hate the United States.” “Wait”, answers Joe, “doesn’t the United States have a significant military presence in Qatar, as well as a major naval presence in Bahrain, putting us under the sheets, so to speak, with both sides of the GCC spat?” “Gosh”, exclaims Jane, “that’s right; but if the United States has a lot of military assets in Qatar, can’t we use our relationship with the Qatari authorities to get them to stop doing such bad things?” “That’s a good question, Jane; we should find an expert who can give us an answer.”

Well, Joe and Jane, here I am. The saga of U.S.-Qatari military cooperation goes back to 1991, when the two governments signed an agreement in the context of Operation Desert Storm. Then, in April 2003, when for all sorts of good reasons the U.S. government finally decided not to keep significant U.S. military assets on Saudi soil, the United States moved its regional air operations to Qatar. The Qataris offered the land for what became Al-Udeid Air Base, and its sister camp called As-Saliyah, for free, and provided both a substantial chunk of change for us to develop the base and local force protection for it. Of course, the fact that the United States based its 5th Fleet nearby in Bahrain meant that we were actually protecting them, a Gulf Arab tradition of sorts going all the way back to the Portuguese in the early 16th century.

Al-Udeid is a large and important base. It can conduct air operations all over the region and out to South Asia as well, not to exclude coverage of Pakistan and Afghanistan (and of course Iran). The way we have played it, or have allowed ourselves to be played, the base gives Qatar leverage over us, not the other way around. So does a recent (July) \$11 billion arms sale, which snags U.S. interests further, creating still more maneuvering room for the Qataris to make mischief. (Heretofore the Qatari order of battle has been mostly supplied by France.) The U.S. need for the base, and the substantial expense and inconvenience of having to move it, enables the Qataris to make mounds of trouble far and wide without fear that we’ll do much of anything about it.

This is not good. In my view, we should bite the bullet and move the base, preferably to the UAE or maybe Oman. We should also, in my view, leave Bahrain and the Al-Khalifa family to its own smarmy devices, or at the very least stop anchoring two or even one aircraft carrier battle group nearby. Our presence provides Iran with a rich set of soft targets to take hostage in the event of hostilities; the carriers themselves are plain old-fashioned sitting ducks. There is nothing we can do from Bahrain that we can’t do just about as well from over the horizon, since U.S. standoff weapons capabilities are vastly superior to those of Iran, or of any other regional power. Joe, Jane, I’m serious: We need to get our butts moved out of there, but not in a precipitous way that suggests a tail-between-legs exit posture. We need to free ourselves from the rentier leverage we’ve provided to our unworthy hosts.

Now, those announcements, if they ever happen, would make big news. I’m not holding my breath. Meanwhile, we’ll have to content ourselves with the new Emirati-Egyptian tag-team combo busting Qatari clients in the chops in Libya. That’s got to be more interesting than the forthcoming PA initiative from the fast-fading Abu Mazen.